

THE  
FALCON OF  
THE QURAISH  
ABDUR RAHMAN  
THE IMMIGRANT OF SPAIN

Lt. General A. I. Akram



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*By the same author*

The Sword of Allah

The Muslim Conquest of Persia

The Muslim Conquest of Egypt and North Africa

The Muslim Conquest of Spain

**THE  
FALCON OF THE QURAISH  
ABDUR RAHMAN  
THE IMMIGRANT OF SPAIN**

**Lt. General A. I. Akram**

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In memory of

my brother Mahmud

May Allah be merciful to him

## PREFACE

It was while I was serving in Madrid as Ambassador of Pakistan, during the years 1978-80, that I wrote *The Muslim Conquest of Spain*. And it was while I was writing that book that I realised how vast was the history of the Muslims in Spain, how splendid their achievements, how extensive and bloody the wars they fought — not only against the Christians but also among themselves, how wide the canvas upon which they painted the destiny of Western Islam and its impact on Christian Europe.

It was then that I concluded that to confine the military history of Islam in Spain to the covers of one volume would be an injustice to the subject. The work called for a series of volumes to inform the interested reader faithfully and clearly about what happened and why it happened. I decided to take up the task of writing all those volumes. *The Muslim Conquest of Spain* was only the first of a long series of which the last volume would describe the tragic fall of Granada at the end of the 15th century.

This is the second book. It is about a man with several appellations: Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, Abdur Rahman the First, Abdur Rahman the Immigrant, the Falcon of the Quraish — a man of iron who achieved the almost impossible, working against almost impossible odds to put his stamp on a world which fought to deny him his place in history. It is the saga of Abdur Rahman from the moment of his flight from the Euphrates, a youth still in his teens, to the time of his death, full of years and full of honour, as master of Cordoba and founder of a dynasty which would rule Spain for nearly three centuries. This is the story of the life and campaigns of a man loved by few, hated by many, feared and respected by all.

I prepared the MSS of the book in 1981 while living in Rawalpindi, soon after my retirement from government service. Then, as I have done with all my books, I travelled abroad to complete my research and see the places which feature in the book. But that was not to happen till the summer of 1983.

I went to London for a fortnight and spent most of it studying in British libraries. Then on to Spain. In Madrid my time was usefully occupied at the *Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura*. Then I flew to Cordoba where I stayed at a hotel next door to the great mosque whose plans were made and foundations laid by Abdur



Rahman, though he was not destined to see the noble work completed.

Here I met my old friend, Manuel Salcines Lopez, who, himself an author, helped me locate some of the places I was anxious to see. Unfortunately, the topography of the land has changed. Places which once echoed to the clash of arms and the thunder of war drums have vanished from memory or exist only as names on a map, often altered into Spanish forms. Such a place is Musara, not far from Cordoba, which was the scene of Abdur Rahman's first battle, a battle which changed the course of Spanish history. The battlefield is now a refuse dump where the city of Cordoba burns its garbage. I went and saw the garbage burning where the history of Spain was decided more than twelve centuries ago.

While travelling in Spain I took time off to visit Portugal for a few days at the invitation of the Portuguese Government to deliver lectures on South Asia at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies and the Institute of National Defence. I also flew to Faro in the south of the country to visit the Institute of Arab Studies at the University of Algarve and give a talk on the Muslim conquest of Spain. I was impressed by the zeal and dedication of the scholarly Professor Jose Domingos Garcia Domingues who, as President of the council of the institute, is directing its studies and striving to revive interest in the Muslim past of Portugal. For this interesting visit my thanks are due to my great friend, Ruy G. de Brito e Cunha, the Portuguese Ambassador in Islamabad.

In three of my earlier books, viz. *The Sword of Allah, The Muslim Conquest of Persia* and *The Muslim Conquest of Egypt and North Africa*, the battles are described in minute detail. The details are available in history and what is not recorded by historians is obtainable on the spot in the form of oral tradition which is remarkably accurate. In the Arab countries which I visited in connection with these books, I met local inhabitants who were of great help in describing historical events whose narrative has been passed down from father to son and lovingly preserved over the centuries.

In Spain it is not so. After the reconquest the Christian rulers of Spain made deliberate efforts to obliterate all traces of Muslim presence in the country, with the result that nothing remains of that presence, in physical form, except the Giralda of Seville, the Mezquita of Cordoba and the Alhambra of Granada, plus a few palaces and gardens here and there. This repressive policy against

the memory of those who had brought beauty and learning to the land continued for centuries and it is only in recent times that liberal policies and a revival of interest in their Muslim past have made the Spaniards, at least the more thoughtful and open-minded ones, conscious of their magnificent Moorish heritage.

This limitation, i.e. the absence of detailed knowledge and oral traditions, affects this book and will affect my future books also. There is not a great deal of detail available about the tactical manoeuvres of battles which form the narrative of this book. That is a pity. It is nevertheless a book about war, a work of military history of which political events are an inseparable part.

Events are best understood in the context of the immediate past from which they spring. To see the events described in this book in the right perspective, it would help the reader to know briefly the history of Muslim Spain which preceded these events. To that end, I have added an Introduction to the book which gives a short summary of the conquest, taken from *The Muslim Conquest of Spain*. A noteworthy feature of this book, which the discerning reader will note, is the change in "the enemy". In all their past wars, in Spain as elsewhere, the Muslims fought infidels(!) — Persians, Romans, Copts in Egypt, Berbers in North Africa, Goths in Spain. In this volume most of the fighting described is among the faithful: Berber vs Arab, Arab vs Arab, in short, tragically, Muslim vs Muslim, with Christians coming on the stage only now and then as a passing interlude. In future volumes this situation will change somewhat as the Christians reappear to play a healthier role in the military history of Muslim Spain.

With the experience of four books behind me, each involving extensive research and travel, I have needed very little help in preparing this one. Those who made my travels more interesting have already been mentioned. It remains only to record my thanks to my Private Secretary, Mohammad Sadiq Baig, for typing the MSS.

This then is my second book on the wars of Muslim Spain. The reader will find it interesting and informative: and to Muslim readers it will sound a warning of the damage suffered by the Muslims when they forget who their real enemies are and turn their arms against each other, as has frequently happened in history, and is happening even today.

Rawalpindi  
September 1983

A. I. Akram



## A NOTE ON ARABIC NAMES

A brief explanation of the system of Arabic names would help the reader in understanding the filial relationship indicated by name. It would also help him to understand why the same person is known by so many different names.

An Arab (and this system is still prevalent in many Arab societies) was known by three names. One was his own personal name, say Talha. Another was the name of his father, say Abdullah, and in this case he was known as Ibn or Bin Abdullah, i.e. son of Abdullah. The third was the name of his son, say Zaid. Thus he could be called Talha or Ibn Abdullah or Abu Zaid, the last being the most respectful way of addressing a person. In certain grammatical forms Abu is expressed as Abi.

Since the father too would be known by the name of a son, the son would at times have a name like Talha Bin Abi Usman, i.e. Talha, son of the Father of Usman. (Usman being a brother of Talha). A man could even be known as Talha Bin Abi Talha, which, translated literally, means: Talha, son of the Father of Talha.

The same rule applies to women. A girl by the name of Asma would be known as Asma Bint Abdullah, i.e. daughter of Abdullah. And on becoming a mother she would take the name of her son or daughter, becoming known as Umm Zaid *i.e.* Mother of Zaid.

In the pronunciation of Arabic names fine differences as between S and Th or Z and Dh, have been ignored in this book, although to Arabs these differences are very real and the sound quite distinct. To simplify pronunciation sounds commonly used in Pakistan — S and Z — have been used throughout the book.

## A NOTE ON THE GEOGRAPHY OF SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

Spain is a subcontinent. In a way it is both Europe and Africa, and the best of both. It is separated from Africa by the Strait of Gibraltar and from Europe by the Pyrenees Mountains, the former being no more significant as an obstacle than the latter. The Pyrenees are in some ways a greater obstacle to movement. It is interesting to note that the Sierra Nevada — the most prominent mountain range in the south — is geologically a continuation of the Riff Mountains of North Africa, across the strait. The bed of the River Guadalquivir is believed by geologists to be the remains of a former strait between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, with all south of it as part of the continent of Africa. Later movements of the earth's crust reduced it to an opening to the Atlantic only. Because of this unique geographical position Spain has been a meeting point between the two continents and a springboard for movement in both directions.

It is a vast peninsula of nearly a quarter million square miles. It is a land of striking contrasts: alpine mountains rising above the snowline and overlooking fertile valleys, wide plains of tableland broken by mountain ranges called sierras — Spanish for "saw" — because of the rugged skyline of the ridges. All but an eighth of the peninsula's outline is a sea-shore washed by the waters of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean; and almost all its coast is hilly, except for bays and gulfs and river deltas which often consist of low swampy ground.

Broadly, the peninsula is corrugated by three major east-west ranges: the Cantabrians in the north, the Guadarramas in the centre and the Sierras in the south. The land is watered by many rivers, big and small. Of the five big ones the Ebro empties into the Mediterranean but the other four, viz the Tagus, the Duero, the Guadiana and the Guadalquivir, flow west into the Atlantic. The Ebro is the only one which plays no part in the watering of the meseta.

1. This description applies not to the Spain of today, with the state of Portugal occupying the western segment of the peninsula, but to the entire peninsula known as Iberia.

The meseta is the central plateau of Spain comprising more than half the surface of the peninsula. With an average elevation of 2000 feet it is the highest plateau in Europe except for Switzerland. It slopes gently and imperceptibly from north to south and from east to west. A hard, windswept tableland, it is divided by the Cordillero (range of mountains) into north and south, the two parts corresponding to what later appeared in history as old and New Castile.

The mountains of Spain, though given above as three major ranges, subdivide into several sub-ranges and many mini ranges, not all of which are mentioned here. The major ones are described below in a few words.

The Cantabrians are the northern-most, hanging over the coastline of the Cantabrian Sea. Misty, cold and forest-clad they cradle gentle valleys and are the most European in form and climate. The Pyrenees are an easterly extension of the Cantabrians, a massif of granite rock with peaks over 11,000 feet and an average height greater than the Alps. They run like a high craggy wall for 280 miles from the Bay of Biscay to the north-western corner of the Mediterranean. They, too, contain within their bosom curving valleys and green pastures.

In the centre of the peninsula runs the range of mountains called the Iberian System, from the Atlantic coast near Lisbon to north and north-east of Madrid and onwards towards Catalonia in the north-east of the peninsula. There are several sierras in this range with gaps separating their ends. The most beautiful is the Sierra de Guadarrama, a corruption of the Arabic Wadi-ur-Ramal — the valley of sand — a river from which the mountains take their name.

In the south is the valley of the Guadalquivir, known in Roman times as Baetis, which separates the Sierra Morena to its north, from the Sierra Nevada to its south. The latter contains the highest crests in the peninsula, rising to over 11,000 feet. It slopes gradually to south and south-east and has deep traverse valleys on both flanks. This was the mountain range destined to see the longest Muslim rule in Spain and witness its tragic end in the fall of Granada.

There are other hilly areas in the peninsula, like the Galician and Portuguese ledges in the west and several sierras. These are not, however, important enough to this history to deserve special mention.

The most important part of Spain from our point of view is



the southern region, known today as Andalusia. It stretches from the Atlantic in the west to the Mediterranean in the east and comprises one quarter of the peninsula. This region of bright sunshine and ample water nourishes the moist fertile soil, especially the broad valley of the Guadalquivir. Except for this valley most of the region is hilly, but even the hilly areas contain deep valleys with rich soil. It was the beautiful coastal zone of this region which attracted the earliest settlers and witnessed the earliest civilisations of Spain. It was to become the real, typical, Muslim Spain<sup>1</sup>.

1. This geographical description has been taken from this author's "The Muslim Conquest of Spain".

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 8th Century AD Spain was ruled by the Goths, a barbarian Germanic nation. More precisely, they were Visigoths or West Goths, as compared with Ostrogoths or East Goths who ruled over Italy and elsewhere. The Visigoths were the conquerors and successors of the Roman Empire in Spain. They captured Toledo in the middle of the 6th Century and made it their capital, putting an end to the 700-year old Roman rule over the country. Thereafter Spain was a kingdom of the Visigoths.

They were a brave, strong, warlike people, hardened to warfare, indeed revelling in it. They made a powerful foe, well versed in the stratagems of war and proficient in both attack and defence, but inclining in their methods of warfare to offensive operations and relying heavily on cavalry which formed the bulk of their army.

The last of the Gothic kings was Roderic, a celebrated general who was elected to the throne by the Senate after the death of King Witiza in 709 AD. The sons of the late king did not take kindly to the enthronement of Roderic and, having failed to overthrow him by military means, took to creating disaffection in the country against the new king. Roderic, however, was strong enough, able enough and popular enough to hold his own against the princes and the faction which supported them.

This was the situation in Spain when it was invaded by Tariq bin Ziyad, a Berber general who would act as spearhead of the Muslim army of Musa bin Nusair, the Arab governor of North Africa. In late April 711, Tariq crossed the strait which separates North Africa from Spain, with an army of 7,000 Berbers, and landed at the foot of the granite rock earlier known as Mount Calpe but which would now be called Jabal Tariq — Mount Tariq — later corrupted to Gibraltar. After a few days spent in skirmishing against weak Gothic detachments, he moved to Tareefa on the south coast of Spain where he received a reinforcement of 5,000 Berbers from North Africa. Upon their arrival Tariq burnt his boats and marched north to face king Roderic on the east bank of the River Barbate, a few miles south-east of the town of Casas Viejas (now Benalup de Sidonia). Here 40,000 Christian Goths, mainly cavalry, faced 12,000 Muslim Berbers, mainly infantry.



The battle of the River Barbate began on July 19, 711, with the Goths taking the initiative. For three days the Muslims were hard pressed by the Gothic cavalry. It was at the end of the third day of battle that Tariq made his famous call to his troops: "O men, where can you fly? Before you is the enemy; behind you is the sea! By Allah, there is nothing for you but faith and perseverance...". During the night which followed, the sons of the late King Witiza, commanding the Gothic wings, made an overture to Tariq and offered to come over to his side.

On the fourth day of battle Tariq launched his counter attack in the form of a double envelopment combined with a powerful frontal thrust. The Gothic wings deserted the army of Roderic and the Gothic main body, after stubborn resistance, was crushed by the Muslims. Roderic was drowned in the Barbate while the remnants of his army broke and fled from the battlefield with the Berbers close upon their heels. Tariq was later to write to his Commander-in-Chief: "We pursued the fugitives for three days following that of victory, without lifting our swords from the necks of the vanquished."

Following the crushing defeat of the Christians, the three sons of Witiza came to Tariq and claimed their reward. Tariq sent them to Musa bin Nusair and Musa sent them to Damascus to see Caliph Al Waleed. The Caliph received them with honour and rewarded them for their services by confirming their possession of the large estates of their father which had been confiscated by Roderic. The princes settled down on their estates, enjoying the fruits of their loyalty to the Muslims: Akhila at Toledo, Artabas at Cordoba and Olmondo at Seville.

Tariq set his army in motion with Cordoba as objective. Upon arrival at Ecija he found another sizeable Gothic force barring his way. Here, in mid-August, another fierce battle was fought and another crushing defeat inflicted upon the Christians. This was the second hardest battle fought by Tariq in Spain and had a shattering effect on Gothic power to resist. They would still resist, but they were no longer able to dispute the Muslim advance or threaten the Muslim presence in Spain.

Tariq made plans for a deeper penetration of the country. He despatched one column to operate in the south, another to capture Cordoba, while he himself marched with the main body of the army to Toledo. The first mentioned column attacked and captured Elvira (beside the future Granada), Malaga and Archidona. The

second detachment under the colourful general Mughees al-Rumi (the Roman) invested Cordoba and after a 2-1/2 months siege beat it into submission at the end of October. Tariq arrived at Toledo and the Gothic capital opened its gates to the conqueror. Over the next few weeks Tariq carried out mopping up operations against Gothic remnants in the region of Guadalajara and Alcala de Henares before returning to Toledo in October-November 711. The winter was now setting in.

Tariq would fight no more battles by himself. He was restrained by Musa bin Nusair who was jealous of his subordinate's glorious achievements and wished to keep some of the glory of the conquest for himself. But Tariq's job was done, and admirably done. He had broken the back of Gothic power in Spain. All that remained was relatively minor opposition which would henceforth be handled by the Commander-in-Chief: Musa bin Nusair.

Musa bin Nusair was one of the great figures of Muslim History and in his time the greatest general in the world. He crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in June 712 with 18,000 Arabs. Landing at Algeciras he advanced north, took Medina Sidonia and Carmona and then laid siege to Seville, which fell after an investment lasting two or three months. Leaving a small detachment to garrison Seville, he marched north and arrived at Merida, a powerful fortified city in Western Spain. The siege which followed was punctuated by lively and bloody encounters and went on for eight months until the garrison surrendered on terms on June 30, 713.

While the siege of Merida was in progress, Musa's son Abdul Azeez, operating with a cavalry division, reconquered Seville whose inhabitants had risen and killed the Muslim soldiers left as a garrison in the city. Next Abdul Azeez conducted some minor operations to reduce the cities in the south-western part of Spain, notably Niebla and Beja, and after these operations marched into the south-east of Spain, driving ahead of him a large Gothic force under Count Theodomir, one of the most distinguished generals and nobles of the Visigoths. Theodomir was finally brought to battle and decisively defeated, but the wily Goth was able to extract a favourable treaty from the Muslims before surrendering his provincial capital of Orihuela on April 5, 713. Thereafter he ruled his province as an honoured and almost independent ruler, though technically subservient to the Muslim power in Spain.

After the fall of Orihuela, Abdul Azeez sent a column along the east coast which captured Alicante. Meanwhile other columns



sent by his father Musa reduced South Western Spain, including Lisbon and Cadiz, thus bringing all of Southern Spain under Muslim Control

A month after the fall of Merida, Musa set off for Toledo. Here he treated Tariq with extreme harshness. He publicly abused him, accused him of disobedience of orders and threw him into prison, making it known that he would be executed. Mughees the Roman was able to persuade the Commander-in-Chief to desist from such an act until the Caliph had decided the matter. Then Mughees travelled to Damascus and told the Caliph about the dispute between Musa and Tariq. The Caliph not only warned Musa not to take action against Tariq but also ordered the latter's reinstatement. The order was promptly obeyed and Tariq was reinstated to his command.

In the spring of 714 began the conquest of Northern Spain with Musa as supreme commander and Tariq commanding the leading division of the army. Musa took Saragosa, Huesca, Lerida, Barcelona, Gerona, Tarragona, Valencia and Denia. Having consolidated his hold on the north-eastern part of Spain, Musa advanced into what is now France but was then the north-eastern extremity of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. A hard battle was fought at Narbonne, the last seat of Visigothic power, and again the Muslims triumphed. Narbonne marked the limit of the Muslim advance. From here they turned back and returned to Saragosa.

From Saragosa the two generals advanced westwards in two separate columns to conquer the north central region of Spain, now Castile and Leon. Opposition was met at some places but easily overcome. One of the interesting events which occurred in this campaign was the conversion at the hands of Tariq of an exalted general and nobleman by the name of Casius (Arabic Qasi). The sons of Casius were to establish a Gothic Muslim dynasty in the northern part of the country which would play an important role in the later history of Muslim Spain.

The two columns under the command of Musa and Tariq, sweeping across the plains of Castile, met at Astorga. From here they turned north to operate as a single force, and at Lugo, a few miles beyond Oviedo, met the last organised opposition and fought their last victorious battle. The remnants of the Gothic force scattered in the mountainous region of Asturias known as Picos de Europa (Peaks of Europe) where they were pursued and hunted

down by fast detachments of Muslim cavalry.

It was now August 714. A few stragglers who survived in the mountains as demoralised, broken fugitives, were no longer a threat to the Muslims. No more enemies were left to fight; no more resistance left to overcome. Spain now belonged to the world of Islam. Soon after, Musa and Tariq journeyed to Damascus on the orders of Caliph al Waleed and Musa's son Abdul Azeez was left in Seville as Governor of Spain.

In Damascus Musa was very badly treated by Caliph Sulaiman who ascended the throne soon after the Muslim general's return. The general was tried, publicly humiliated, dismissed from all his offices, dispossessed of all of his wealth and placed under a kind of house arrest to live the rest of his life in relative poverty. Tariq returned to Spain to live in honourable retirement. The Caliph even turned against the sons of Musa bin Nusair. As a result of his machinations, Abdul Azeez was assassinated in March 716 while leading the prayers in the mosque of Seville.

Upon his death the soldiers themselves elected a nephew of Musa, one named Ayub bin Habeeb, to rule over them. Ayub bin Habeeb acted as governor for six months during which he moved the capital of Muslim Spain to Cordoba. Then a new governor was appointed by the Caliph.

This last move was a milestone in the earlier history of Muslim Spain. It marked a change from the conquest and rule of the country by Musa bin Nusair and his family to government by officials appointed directly by Damascus or by the Muslim Viceroy at Qairowan, which was the capital of North Africa and from where the Viceroy exercised jurisdiction, on behalf of the Caliph, over the newly conquered territory of Spain. With this change the continuity of command in Spain was broken. Had Abdul Azeez remained alive and in command he would have consolidated and strengthened the Muslim hold on the country. Now the flow of political and military direction was disrupted. This was unfortunate for the Muslims and fortunate for the nucleus of Christian resistance whose embers in the northern mountain of Asturias were dying but not quite dead.<sup>1</sup>

The new man who came to rule over Spain was Al Hurr bin Abdur Rahman As-Saqafi. It is at this point that we take up the thread, in this volume, of the military history of Muslim Spain.

1. This summary has been taken from this author's: "The Muslim Conquest of Spain".

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## I: THE WAR IN FRANCE

The Caliph at Damascus was Sulaiman bin Abdul Malik — a vain, pleasure-loving and very handsome man known for his ability to consume enormous quantities of food.<sup>1</sup> He was the Caliph who treated Musa bin Nusair, conqueror of Spain, with fiendish cruelty and engineered the murders of his sons: Abdul Azeez in Seville and Abdullah in Qairowan. In 716 he appointed his freedman Muhammad bin Yazeed as Viceroy at Qairowan with the words: "O Muhammad bin Yazeed, fear Allah, the One who has no partners. Go and work where I have appointed you governor, with truth and justice. I appoint you governor of Africa and the Maghreb."<sup>2</sup>

With these pious words ringing in his ears, Muhammad bin Yazeed journeyed to North Africa to take charge of his post. The pious words of the Caliph were followed by the Caliph's orders to imprison Musa's son Abdullah, who was governor until the arrival of this incumbent, and torture him to death. The Caliph's orders were promptly executed.

Africa, as the early Muslims knew it, or as the Romans then knew it, was not the Africa of today. It was the northern belt of the continent stretching from Barqa in Libya to about Algiers, with Qairowan in present-day Tunisia as its capital. Beyond Algiers lay the Maghreb, which literally means *the west*, with its capital at Tangier. Both regions, each of which was then a large province of Islam, now together comprise North Africa which extends from Libya in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west.

Spain was a province under the Viceroy of Africa.<sup>3</sup> This arrangement had come down from the time of Musa bin Nusair who was Viceroy of Africa at the same time as he was conqueror of Spain. So now Spain was also under Muhammad bin Yazeed, the new Viceroy at Qairowan. Soon after the assassination of Abdul Azeez at Seville, the Viceroy appointed as governor of Spain a distinguished general by the name of Al Hurr bin Abdur Rahman As Saqafi. Hurr would replace at Cordoba the old governor, Ayub bin Habeeb, nephew of Musa bin Nusair.

1. Masudi: *Muruj*: vol 3, p 158.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 47.

3. We use the word Viceroy loosely, inasmuch as he represented the Caliph who was for all purposes a monarch and passed on his kingdom in dynastic succession to members of his family, brothers or sons.

There was some apprehension at Qairowan that the transition might not be a peaceful one. In view of the brutality with which Caliph Sulaiman had treated Musa and his family and the respect and affection in which that family was held in Spain, it was right to be cautious. Consequently, Hurr took with him an escort of 400 horsemen, just in case. The escort consisted not of common soldiers but of well-born warriors from the best Arab clans. Hurr arrived in Cordoba in August 716 (Zul Haj 97 Hijri) to find a respectful ex-governor waiting for him. Ayub bin Habeeb, retired to his house. There was no trouble, and Hurr established himself as governor of Spain.<sup>1</sup> With the installation of Hurr a new era opened in Muslim Spain — an era of bold and bloody incursions into France.



A later chapter will describe the political situation in France, or Gaul as it was then called, in the early years of the 8th Century. For the moment it is sufficient for the reader to know a little about the areas lying in the south of France, either contiguous with Spain or near enough to be within striking distance of expeditions launched from Spain. There were three distinct areas: Aquitaine, Septimania and Burgundy (see Map I).

Aquitaine was a large part of France, almost a third of the country, lying on the Atlantic with the Pyrenees Mountains as its southern extremity and the River Loire marking its northern and eastern boundaries. Once a part of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, it was now an independent Frankish duchy (virtually kingdom) ruled by Duke Eudes from his capital at Toulouse.

Septimania was an extension of the coastal zone of Spain into France and extended from the eastern foothills of the Pyrenees to the River Rhone. This region was later called Languedoc, although Languedoc stretched farther north along the Rhone. The word Septimania meant *seven cities*, and the province was so called because of the seven cities in it, viz Carcassonne, Narbonne, Beziers, Nimes, Agde, Lodeve and Maguelone. The province had always been a part of the Visigothic kingdom of Spain. After the destruction of Visigothic power in the main part of the peninsula,

1. The Muslim capital of Spain had been moved by Ayub bin Habeeb from Seville to Cordoba, but there are accounts which say that it was Hurr who effected that move.

Musa bin Nusair had advanced into Septimania and conquered Narbonne, the capital of the province, but left it later to return to Spain. Septimania was still Visigothic but rather uncertain as to its new position: an independent duchy or county sandwiched between the Franks in the north and the Muslims in the south, and not knowing which was more to be feared.

East and north-east of Septimania lay the kingdom of Burgundy which extended from the Mediterranean coast northwards, west of the Alps, up the valleys of the Rhone and the Saone. In the 5th Century this had been the powerful kingdom of the Burgundians, a Germanic barbarian nation, but in the 6th Century it was overrun by the Franks who extinguished the Burgundian dynasty. Later, however, it re-emerged as an independent kingdom and now, early in the 8th Century, it was a country of Burgundians and Franks, ruled by a branch of the Merovingian Franks.

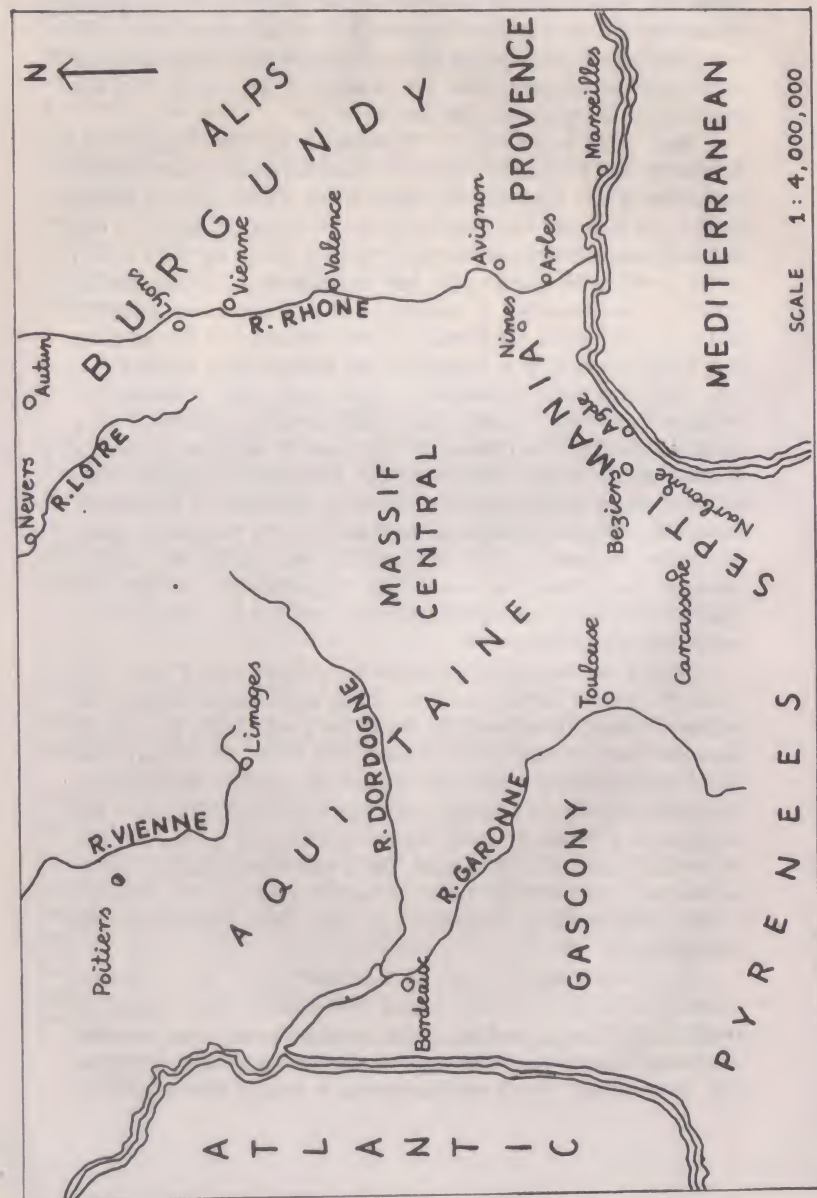
The area most accessible to Spain and most vulnerable to Muslim raids was Septimania which was, geographically, a continuation into the French coastal zone of the coastal zone of North-Eastern Spain. The Pyrenees Mountains stopped some distance short of the coast and were no obstacle to movement. Moreover, because Septimania had been part of Visigothic Spain, which the Muslims had just conquered, it was natural for them to continue their forward move into this region as part of their war against the Christians. Hence the first Muslim campaign was a march into Septimania.

The drive behind the Muslim expeditions into France was based on several factors, each of which acted as an impulse for military venture. There was the desire for glory on the part of the generals. There was the quest for merit with Allah, on the part of all Muslims, in fighting a holy war against the infidel. There was the intangible century-old impetus to expand the frontiers of Islam and bring more of humanity under the law of the Quran in order to save the sons of Adam from their sins. There was also the temptation to acquire wealth, although this has been exaggerated by Western writers and unfairly presented as the only reason for the expeditions.

The latter charge is an over-simplification. The Christian monasteries in France were known to possess a vast amount of wealth in the form of gold and silver ornaments and utensils, as well as precious stones of immense value. Since, to the early Muslims, with their simple desert egalitarianism, a temple was a place of



MAP 1: SOUTHERN FRANCE



worship and not a place to store treasure, the wealth of the churches and monasteries was fair game. It was better to use it for the sustenance of the faithful than to leave it lying in the church as a superficial and useless adornment for a place which did not need any.

★

Hurr, a bold and forceful general, was the first of the commanders of expeditions into France. Seeking glory in war and merit with Allah, he set off from Cordoba in the spring of 718 with a sizeable force of Muslims. He first took Barcelona. This was actually a reoccupation because the city had been conquered three years earlier by Musa bin Nusair and Tariq bin Ziyad and apparently left ungarrisoned when they marched off to conquer the north of Spain. From Barcelona Hurr followed the coastal route into Septimania. What his precise conquests were is not known and reports of his capture of Narbonne are probably not true. However, he launched his raiding columns into various districts of Septimania and gathered spoils of war in large quantities.

This went on for a few months. Then he had to return to Spain because there was trouble with the Christians in Navarre, and in Cordoba also there was some disorder. Things were not well in Spain and they got no better with the return of Hurr. He was a hard and inflexible man, severe in chastising defaulters, his heavy hand falling on one and all irrespective of race and religion. His military ability and judgment were not matched by an equal talent in administration and political organization, with the result that his harsh methods turned the people against him. They began to see him as an oppressor while the riches he brought from France did little to soften his image. The complaints of the people found their way to the new Caliph who decided that it was time for Spain to have another governor.

★

The new Caliph in Damascus was Umar bin Abdul Azeez, a noble and devout Muslim of upright character and strong sense of justice, quite unlike the rest of the *Umayyad* caliphs to whose line he belonged. He was so well thought of that the Muslims referred to him as the Fifth Caliph, in other words putting him on the same



level in faith, purity and virtue as the first four Caliphs of Islam. Unfortunately, he was not destined to rule for long; his caliphate lasted only 2½ years.

Umar bin Abdul Azeez made strenuous efforts to serve the cause of Islam, to strengthen the faith and bring it back to its original purity which had suffered at the hands of recent caliphs. He paid especial attention to North Africa where he sent teachers and guides, even *Tabis*. A *Tabi* (literally follower) was a man who knew a *Sahabi*; a *Sahabi* (literally companion) was a man who knew Prophet Muhammad, on whom be peace. Now, 90 years after the death of the Holy Prophet, there were no Sahabis left and the Tabis were the highest in holiness and regarded with the deepest veneration. The Caliph sent ten Tabis to North Africa. This group of teachers and guides played a big part in purifying Muslim life in *Africa* and converted a large number of Berbers who had not hitherto been converted. Having heard of the disorder in Spain and the futility of the harsh methods of Hurr in repairing the state of affairs, the Caliph dismissed him from his post and in his place appointed a general already serving in Spain: Al Samh bin Malik al Khaulani. While making the appointment the Caliph decreed that henceforth Spain would be separate from Africa and ruled directly from Damascus. Samh took over as governor in April 719 (Ramzan 100 Hijri).

The Caliph instructed Samh to guide the people on the right path of Islam, to direct the affairs of state with truth and justice, and to take from conquered lands and estates a fifth of their value as the stipulated share of the state. This apparently had not been properly done before. He also asked the new governor for a detailed geographical description of Spain so that the Caliph could know the country a little better. Umar bin Abdul Azeez even considered an evacuation of the Muslims from Spain. He was apprehensive that they would come to harm because they had gone very far from the heartland of Islam, had got separated from their fellows and deeply involved with the enemies of Islam. Fortunately for Muslim Spain, he was dissuaded from implementing this plan on the assurance that the Muslims, having multiplied in Spain and spread over the land, were in no danger of losing life or faith.

Samh proved an effective administrator. During his first year as governor he busied himself with the affairs of the provinces and put the administration on a more efficient footing. He followed closely the instructions of the virtuous Caliph and established

justice and fairness in the administration, earning the praise and gratitude of all over whom he ruled. One of his notable deeds was the building of the great bridge over the Guadalquivir at Cordoba. The old Roman bridge had collapsed long before and recently the south-western wall of Cordoba had also crumbled. After obtaining the Caliph's permission, Samh rebuilt the bridge by using the stones from the fallen wall. This bridge was built in the year 101 Hijri (719-720).

Having put the internal affairs of Spain in order, he turned his attention to the holy war. He was as brave and bold in war as he was just and capable in administration. Moreover, he was anxious to revive the spirit of Islam which had animated earlier generations of Muslims. Some time in the spring of 720 he marched from Cordoba with a large army, crossed the Pyrenees by its eastern end and entered France. With his army divided into fast mounted columns, he overran the nearer districts of Septimania, breaking such opposition as he met and establishing the rule of Islam over the conquered territory. In every part of Septimania taken by his column, Samh imposed taxes and the *Jizya*, the latter being a nominal poll-tax imposed upon non-Muslims in return for a guarantee of protection against external enemies. In matters of local administration, however, the inhabitants of the conquered territory were left to be ruled by their own officials under their own laws.

The main action this year was the conquest of Narbonne, an ancient Celtic town which was now the capital of Septimania. This city lay near the sea with access by boat from the Mediterranean. Since it was located on the main axis of advance into South-Eastern France, it was a place of considerable strategic importance. Samh laid siege to Narbonne, which lasted for 18 days before he succeeded in storming the city and putting an end to its resistance. This was the greatest prize gained by Samh in this campaign.

The Muslims spent the winter in Narbonne. During this inactive season Samh turned the city into a citadel for defence, rebuilding its fortifications and converting it into an impregnable fortress. Large stocks of provisions and arms were stocked in the fortress which would henceforth be manned by a sizeable Muslim garrison. The foresight shown by Samh in preparing Narbonne as a fortress would prove its value in later decades during Islam's war against the Franks.

As the winter passed Samh once again set out on a campaign



of conquest. This time his objective was Aquitaine. Leaving a garrison in Narbonne, he marched with the bulk of the army in a westerly direction, his cavalry spreading out in the countryside to clear whatever opposition remained in the neighbouring districts. The Muslims took Carcassone without difficulty and continued the advance till they had got to Toulouse, some time in the end of May or early June 721.

Toulouse was the capital of Aquitaine. This large region had been part of the Visigothic kingdom in the 5th Century but at the beginning of the 6th Century it had been overrun by the Franks and become a Frankish duchy whose rulers acted most of the time as independent monarchs. The present duke, Eudes, was one of the boldest and most successful of the Frankish warlords, a man both cunning and brave, of whom more will be said in later chapters. The Muslims were to find in him a doughty opponent and a wily adversary.

Eudes had watched with apprehension as the Muslims raided far and wide in neighbouring Septimania. He was heartened by the knowledge that the Muslim strength was less than the force he himself could muster against them. Once he received word that the Muslims were marching towards his capital, he gathered his forces — mainly Germanic barbarians of the Frankish and Gothic nations, but augmented by a large number of Gascons, the original inhabitants of the regions lying between Toulouse, the western Pyrenees and the Atlantic. He was able to put together a very large force to oppose the Muslim invaders. With this force he marched away from the city, leaving a garrison to man its defences, and went into concealment some distance away. His plan was to let the Muslims engage Toulouse and waste their energy in trying to break its defences and overpower its garrison; and at a suitable time he would fall upon them unexpectedly with the bulk of his army. It was a very clever plan.

Upon arrival at Toulouse the Muslims laid siege to the city and began to prepare siege engines — catapults to bombard the city. Several engagements took place between the Muslims and the defenders in each of which the advantage lay with the Muslims. If the strength of the garrison was not very great, the Muslims had no way of knowing it, nor did they have any knowledge of the fact that only a small part of the enemy stood within the city while most of the Christian force lay in hiding some distance away. Confident of victory, Samh prepared for a final assault on Toulouse.

Then suddenly one morning his scouts reported the approach of an innumerable host in the rear of the Muslims as they faced the city. This was Duke Eudes advancing with his army of barbarians, mainly infantry, to take the Muslims by surprise. The clouds of dust raised by his troops obscured the light of the sun.<sup>1</sup> The Muslims were vastly outnumbered. The sudden and unexpected arrival of a large enemy force would normally have a paralysing effect upon those surprised, but the confidence gained by the Muslims in ten years of victorious operations against the Christians in Spain and France was strong enough to withstand the shock effect. Samh saw this not as a disaster but as a challenge. The Muslims turned about to face the Christians, full of courage and resolve, while Samh hastily redeployed his army for a battle in the open, with his back to the city.

It had been the intention of Eudes to take the Muslims by surprise and attack them in the rear while they were engaged against the defences of Toulouse, but he arrived to find the Muslims not only arrayed for battle against him but actually advancing towards him. Samh had decided not to wait for the Christians, but to wrest the initiative from them. The regiments under his command were mainly cavalry and thus more suited to mobile and offensive operations than static and defensive ones. So he chose to attack. Unawed by the superior numbers of the Christians and reciting Quranic verses, he launched his cavalry into action. The Muslims advanced boldly to attack the advancing front of the Christians.

The Christian front continued to advance, which created the unusual situation of two opposing forces advancing simultaneously against each other instead of the more usual situation of one force attacking and the other defending. When they were close enough, the Muslim cavalry charged, while the barbarians stood to receive the attack, confident in their numbers and the leadership of their intrepid duke. The two armies met and battle was on. We do not know the strength of the opposing forces. We know the approximate location of the battlefield — close to Toulouse, practically under its walls. We know the date of this fateful encounter: June 10, 721 (Zul Haj 9, 102 Hijri).

It was a hard and pitiless struggle with no quarter given or taken, more frightful, according to the chroniclers, than could be

1. Conde: p 95; Arsalan: p 71.



imagined. The two armies fell upon each other like...“two torrents falling from the mountains to the plain”, like “two mountains clashing”<sup>1</sup>. There was terrible slaughter and the ground was littered with the bodies of the fallen. Both sides fought heroically and victory hung for a long time in the balance.

The two commanding generals proved themselves worthy leaders of brave men. Yet, we know more about the performance of the Muslim general than that of his opponent. Samh was everywhere, brave as a lion, roaring like an angry stallion,<sup>2</sup> the blood of his enemies flowing from his arms and his sword. Wherever he attacked, his enemies fell under his blows. Thus fighting and exhorting his men to fight, he plunged deep into the ranks of the Christians, and here he was struck by a Christian lance which pierced him from side to side. The Muslim general fell lifeless from his horse, finding in death the joy of martyrdom which he had eagerly sought.

The picture at once changed. The death of their commander threw the Muslim cavalry into disorder. Under the pressure of Frankish attacks, the Muslims withdrew speedily from the battle field, leaving behind a very large number of dead which included many notable officers. In this critical situation the command of the army was taken by Abdur Rahman bin Abdullah Al Ghafiqi, and it was only the heroic labours of this magnificent soldier which saved the Muslims from total disaster. He carried out a skilful retreat from Toulouse and got the remnants of the army safely back to Narbonne, where he was chosen by general acclamation as commander of the Muslim army. Abdur Rahman was a much admired officer and loved for the prodigies of valour performed by him in battle, especially at Toulouse and in the retreat from Toulouse.

We know very little about the details of this battle, the tactical manoeuvres, the actual strength of the opposing forces, etc. Even the location of the battlefield is only approximately known, i.e. under the walls of the city of Toulouse. It is known that the Muslims lost heavily in dead, though Duke Eudes too paid a high price for his victory. For Muslims their repulse at Toulouse was more than a defeat in battle; greater than the loss of lives and territory was the moral loss of losing. It was the first time that the

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

Muslims had suffered a defeat and left the battlefield to the Christians since they set foot on the coast of Spain ten years before. It showed the Christians that the Muslims could be beaten. It was the first victory of a Germanic nation over the Muslims and had the effect of discouraging the Muslims from entering the land of the Franks and diverted their future operations to South - Eastern France — Septimania and the valley of the Rhone. It was a victory for Duke Eudes. The honour of being the first West European general to inflict a military defeat upon the Muslims goes to Eudes and not, as generally supposed, to Charles Martel who will appear shortly in our history.

But while Eudes gloated over the unprecedented victory, he did not know that his surviving opponent, Abdur Rahman, would one day not only drive him from his capital of Toulouse but also chase him right out of his duchy of Aquitaine. Abdur Rahman now lived with a single thought in his mind, that of vengeance. He lived for the day when he would once again clash with Franks, specially Duke Eudes of Aquitaine. Meanwhile, he retired with the remnants of his army to Spain, leaving a garrison to hold Narbonne. The Viceroy of Africa approved his assumption of command in Spain and confirmed his appointment, but only as a temporary measure. Two months later another governor was appointed, another ardent holy warrior named Anbasa bin Suhaim of the tribe of Kalb.



Umar bin Abdul Azeez was dead. The noble Caliph died the year previous to Toulouse, on February 10, 720 (Rajab 25, 101 Hijri) and with his death ended a bright interlude of piety in the ninety-year reign of the Umayyad dynasty. Even the enemies of the Ummayyads felt the loss, as one of them mourned: “O son of Abdul Azeez, if human eyes could weep for anyone of the house of Umayya, these of mine should have wept for you.”<sup>1</sup>

After Umar bin Abdul Azeez, Yazeed bin Abdul Malik came to the throne of Damascus. With his assumption of the caliphate Spain was again put under the jurisdiction of Afriqia, in other words under the Viceroy at Qairowan. The year following his coming to power the caliph appointed as Viceroy of all North Africa an ex-slave, Yazeed bin Abi Muslim — a horrible man who proved

1. Conde: p 93.



a horrible ruler and met a just end in due course by being killed by the Berbers. Luckily for the Muslims in Spain he did not have much to do with their country, beyond appointing governors. Two months after the Battle of Toulouse he named Anbasa bin Suhaim al kalbi as Governor of Spain, replacing Abdur Rahman bin Abdullah.

The replacement of Abdur Rahman was due not to any opinions which the Viceroy might have held about the personalities concerned but to opposition by the colleagues of Abdur Rahman. After choosing him as their commander when the army was under the shock of its bloody repulse at Toulouse and the situation was critical, the generals began to have second thoughts. They were moved by envy. Abdur Rahman was the idol of the army, admired by the troops not only for his valour and heroism in combat but also for his generosity in rewarding the troops for good work done. The generals grudged him his fame and popularity. Consequently, they wrote letters to the Viceroy asserting Abdur Rahman's unsuitability for high command. They did not dispute his courage or his excellent military qualities; they criticized his administration and liberality and the fact that he could not refuse his men anything after a successful operation.

The machinations of his jealous rivals led to the removal of Abdur Rahman by the Viceroy and his replacement by Anbasa, who was also an esteemed general and known for his courage and judgement. He took command in August 721 (Safar 103 Hijri), and such was the purity of heart of Abdur Rahman that instead of being offended by his removal from a command which he so richly deserved, he welcomed the new governor and felicitated him sincerely and cordially upon his appointment. Abdur Rahman assumed his old command in Spain, probably a division of the army.

The situation which faced Anbasa was anything but re-assuring. In the first place, there was a depression in mood because of the loss of lives suffered at Toulouse and the thought that the Muslims could no longer regard themselves as invincible. Secondly, while Anbasa was held in respect generally and no one grudged him his promotion, the removal of the highly esteemed Abdur Rahman did not go down well with the troops. Lastly, as a result of the Muslim defeat at Toulouse, the Goths had risen again in many parts of Septimania to reassert their independence from Muslim rule. The best the Muslims could do was to hold on to

Narbonne and chastise some of the rebels who were getting too bold.

Then there was trouble in the northern region of Spain. Instigated by the priests and chieftains, many local inhabitants took advantage of Muslim discomfiture in Septimania by defying Muslim rule over their districts. This was part of the fallout from Toulouse and hung like a dark cloud over the northern horizon.

For a few months Anbasa applied himself to the matters of administration and the organisation of the frontiers. After the recent setbacks suffered by it the army was not in very good shape. Anbasa concluded that it would be a mistake to launch it into military ventures until it was once again at the peak of efficiency and zeal. So he concentrated on reorganising the civil administration and the army, raising the spirits of the soldiers while preparing for the next campaign. It was not difficult. The men believed in the holy war, believed in its merit. All they wanted was a general who would lead them against the Franks; and the generals were there, no less animated by the spirit of Islam than the men they commanded. Anbasa waited more than a year before taking the field.

The main centres of insurrection in Northern Spain were the Cantabrian Mountains and the region south of the River Ebro, at Tudela and Tarazona. The uprising in the first of these, i.e. Cantabrica, under a man named Pelayo, was to have far-reaching consequences and is dealt with separately in the next chapter. The other region, that of the middle Ebro, was the first to be tackled by Anbasa when he felt that he had got his army back in reasonable shape. For a start he would use it against a relatively easier enemy — the disorganised rebels of Spain — and then go on to the tougher task of invading France. This was a very sensible policy, to go progressively from easier to more difficult objectives.

In 723 (104-105 Hijri) Anbasa marched from Cordoba to deal with the Christian rebels in the Ebro region. The largest concentration was at Tarazona, and here he struck hard to suppress the insurrection and bring the rebels back to submission. His operations met with complete success. He subdued the region, destroyed every castle where the standard of revolt had been raised and punished the rebel leaders. In order to discourage the local population from further rash ventures, he increased the taxes on the towns and villages which had taken part in the rebellion.



Henceforth any town which had been conquered a second time, i.e. after a revolt, would pay double taxes. Anbasa completed these operations by the end of the year, and for a long time there would be no more trouble in this region.



At the beginning of 724 (mid 106 Hijri), Anbasa crossed the eastern end of the Pyrenees with a large army to fight his holy war against the infidel. He marched to Narbonne, which was already in Muslim hands, and from here he launched his initial operations which consisted of raids in which columns were left free to overrun the neighbouring districts of Septimania. His men raided the towns and villages, burning some and plundering others. We know that Anbasa did not like this, that he did not approve of causing unnecessary hardship to the people over whose territory the war was being fought, but he had to accept it because his troops wanted booty and were eager to engage in the holy war to get it. Moreover, these raids were aimed at communities which had renounced their allegiance to the Muslims and they played an important role in re-establishing the ascendancy of the Muslims over their opponents and creating the right psychological atmosphere.

When the raids had gone on for some time, Anbasa concentrated his forces and made a move against Carcassone. He invested the city, and soon after the start of the siege the defenders surrendered to the Muslims under a treaty which left them in peace in return for the payment of the usual taxes, the release of Muslim prisoners held in the city since Toulouse, and the return of all booty taken from the Muslims in the aftermath of Toulouse and which was still lying in Carcassone. Anbasa was careful not to make any threatening move towards Toulouse where the wily duke watched and waited.

With Narbonne and Carcassone in his hands Anbasa now advanced north-east. In a fast-moving operation he took the cities of Beziers and Nimes and all the towns in between, each of which surrendered without resistance. With the capture of the district of Nimes the Muslims had got to the River Rhone, for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

1. There is one report (Arsalan: p 72) about the Muslims taking Arles also, at the mouth of the Rhone, but this is not true. Arles is on the east bank of the river and the Muslims did not cross the River Rhone anywhere, not in this campaign.

Here Anbasa stopped to organise his conquest. The Visigothic inhabitants of the province submitted in peace and returned to the allegiance of the Muslims which they had renounced after the battle of Toulouse. They agreed to pay taxes and the personal Jizya, and as a guarantee of good behaviour gave hostages who were sent to Barcelona for safe custody. All Septimania was now taken. The Muslims had reached the Rhone and the year 724 came to a successful end.

The winter passed and with the approach of spring, 725, (end 106 - beginning 107 Hijri) Anbasa was ready for the next operation. This would be a raid on a grand scale. Starting from Nimes he marched up the Rhone and advanced into the heart of Burgundy, which was a kingdom of Burgundians and Franks, ruled by a Frankish dynasty. The Muslims took Vienne and Lyons. From Lyons they moved up the bank of the River Saone and sacked Chalon and Autun, the latter action taking place on August 21, 725.

Up to here the army had operated more or less as a single force directed by Anbasa. After Autun it was divided into several columns which overran the region north of Burgundy, the Muslim squadrons getting to Dijon and as far as Luxeuil at the foot of the Vosges Mountains. Another strong column went westwards to Nevers on the River Loire while yet another struck at Sens, 60 miles south-east of Paris.

In most of these raiding operations there was hardly any opposition from the Franks or the Burgundians. Wherever the Muslim cavalry rode, the local inhabitants laid down their arms and asked for peace which was as readily granted. The Muslims contented themselves with gathering the treasures of the churches and monasteries, and there was so much booty to choose from that they only took treasure, weapons and horses, ignoring other things of value which they would have picked up in a less richly endowed land. There was also some destruction of monasteries, notably at Lyons, Autun, and Luxeuil.

All this while Duke Eudes was watching at Toulouse, unconcerned with the Muslim raiding operations because that was not his territory. Charles Martel, who ruled at Paris and who will shortly be introduced to the reader, was busy fighting the wild Saxons, Alamanni and Thuringians to prevent them from crossing the River Rhone against his Franks. The intense rivalry between the two Frankish lords, Eudes and Charles, prevented them from



coordinating their efforts to meet the danger from the new Muslim power in Spain. Thus there was no one of any consequence to oppose the Muslims. They took all they wanted and mastered all the land they surveyed.

The summer ended. It was now autumn. Anbasa gathered his forces once again and marched back. This had been a raid on a gigantic scale and not a campaign of conquest. The Muslims had no intention at this stage of establishing their hegemony over any part of France other than Septimania which they regarded as theirs. That conquest was theirs to keep and was organised as a territory of Islam. So the army marched back to Septimania.

On the return march there was a clash with some Franks. We do not know the location of this event but Anbasa was personally involved and fought with his usual courage. In this clash he was badly wounded and soon after succumbed to his wounds. This happened in December 725 (Shaban 107 Hijri). Anbasa was the second Muslim Commander-in-Chief to meet a martyr's death in France.

Before he died Anbasa named Uzra bin Abdullah al Fehri as his successor; and Uzra marched the army to Narbonne and then back to Spain<sup>1</sup>.

1. This general has also been called Urwa.

## 2: A MAN NAMED PELAYO

The events now being described took place before the events narrated in the preceding chapter. They precede even the operations of Anbasa on the River Ebro, but are placed here in order not to break the continuity of the narrative of the operations in France. Since these events form a landmark in the reconquest of Spain by the Christians, they are taken here as a whole, separate from the operations in France and on the Ebro.

No writer can attempt to prepare a narrative of these events — to be precise the episode of Pelayo and Covadonga without serious misgivings about their historical accuracy. The extremely one-sided accounts available to us range from a shrug of the shoulders by Muslim historians to the invention of a great romantic epic by Spanish ones, including various miraculous happenings. The early Spanish history of the reconquest is such a mixture of fact and fiction, of history and legend inextricably interwoven, that it is extremely difficult to separate the two and present a narrative of events which would be universally acceptable. Nowhere is there such confusion as in the matter of Covadonga. The episode is a nightmare for a research scholar, but one from which there is no escape.

The conquest of Spain was completed by Musa and Tariq in the summer of 714. The last organised opposition of the Christians was crushed at Santa Maria de Lugo,<sup>1</sup> 5 miles north of Oviedo. The fugitives of this battle who took shelter in the Picos de Europa (the high and difficult part of the Asturian Mountains) were chased and hunted down by Muslim patrols which returned to report that all was clear and that any wretched fellows who survived in the cold and inaccessible mountains were of no consequence. The conquest of Spain was complete when Musa and Tariq began their journey to Damascus in September 714 at the bidding of the Caliph.

After the battle of Lugo just mentioned, Tariq had advanced to the Cantabrian Coast and become the first Muslim governor of Gijon. When Musa and Tariq were both recalled to Syria, Musa left a Berber Muslim general named Munusa as governor at Gijon, with responsibility for all the northern area of the country, especially the province of Asturias. Munusa had been a Christian in the Maghreb

1. Now Lugo de Llanera.



and became a Muslim shortly before Tariq's invasion and fought under Tariq during the conquest of Spain. His timely end is described in the next chapter. He was a brilliant leader, a brave warrior, a wily and unscrupulous man, and a very ugly fellow with an abnormal fondness for pretty women. He was the first Muslim general to deal with the man named Pelayo.

Pelayo was a well born Visigoth, son of Duke Fafila, though of what place this man was duke is not known.<sup>1</sup> The duke had been an official at the court of King Egica (687-701). Pelayo was a page and later a member of the royal guard in the time of Egica's successor Witiza, the penultimate king of Gothic Spain, but incurred the royal wrath and was exiled from Toledo. After Witiza's death he probably joined the faction of Roderic, the last Visigothic king of Spain, and probably fought at the battle of Barbate which opened the doors of Spain to the Muslims. The story of Pelayo is full of "probables".<sup>2</sup>

As the Muslim conquest proceeded, Pelayo and other Goths continued to retire northwards, their pace quickened by the advancing squadrons of Tariq and Musa. After the last battle at Lugo, in which he might or might not have taken part, Pelayo arrived at Gijon on the northern coast of Spain. He could retire no farther; and as the Muslims established their rule in the country with peace and security guaranteed to the Christians in return for obedience and payment of the Jizya, Pelayo settled down in Gijon with his beautiful sister, on whom fell the eyes of Munusa, the Muslim governor of Asturias. At this stage Pelayo appears to have had good relations with the governor.

In 717 Munusa sent Pelayo as a hostage to Cordoba to ensure the good behaviour of the Goths and other Christians living in Asturias. According to Spanish sources, however, he did this in order to have the field open for an amorous adventure with the man's sister.<sup>3</sup> Once Pelayo was out of Gijon, Munusa married the girl. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this because a large number of noble-born Spanish ladies had married or would marry Arab and Berber officers. The widow of King Roderic, Queen Agela, had married Musa's son Abdul Azeez, with whom she had lived in Seville until his assassination.

1. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Kingdom of Asturias*: p 120.

2. Even his being a Goth is in doubt (Ibn khaldun; vol 4, p 386) and depends on the shaky evidence of unreliable early Christian sources like *Cronica de Alfonso III*. However, his ancestry as described by these sources is accepted because we have nothing better to go on!

3. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Kingdom of Asturias*: p. 122

Later in the same year Pelayo slipped out of Cordoba and returned to Gijon. He was incensed to find his sister married to the Muslim chief. He openly declared his opposition to the union and, fearing for his life, fled Gijon, at the same time raising the standard of revolt against Muslim rule. His motives were not a simple matter of outraged family honour. About this time the Muslim governor of Spain, Hurr, was preparing the first expedition against France to which Muslim energies would henceforth be directed. Pelayo chose this as the right moment to take advantage of Muslim commitments elsewhere by starting an uprising in Asturias.

Coming to know of his flight, Munusa sent a mounted patrol after Pelayo. The Muslims almost got him at Brece,<sup>1</sup> but the fugitive got wind of their approach and made off with the Muslim horsemen in close pursuit. He got to the River Pilonia where, we are told, he escaped the clutches of his pursuers by swimming across the river on his horse while they had to stop on the bank.<sup>2</sup> This is strange because Pilonia is a shallow mountain stream which a child could wade across and it must be difficult for any one to find a place deep enough for a horse to swim. Be that as it may, Pelayo got away and did not stop till he reached Conga de Onis, a small village on the river Sella in one of the lower valleys in the northern mountain slopes of the Picos de Europa. Conga de Onis is about 30 miles east of Gijon.

Pelayo now sent messages to the local inhabitants of Asturias -i.e. the original Asturians — to join him in resisting the Muslim invaders. He upbraided them for not fighting on and for bowing so quickly before the foreign conqueror, and called upon them to prepare for a war of vengeance which would expel the Muslims from the land. The Asturians were an unspoiled and un-Romanised mountain people and responded readily to his overture and came in large numbers to meet the new champion of Christianity. They assured him that they would fight for their liberty and for the land which yet remained in their hands.

There was a general assembly in Conga de Onis at the very end of 718 at which the people elected Pelayo as their leader. This appears to have been mainly an assembly of Asturians and an election by Asturians rather than by Gothic fugitives, although some of the latter were undoubtedly present and were later to

1. Probably Santa Cruz de Brez (Sanchez - Albornoz: *Kingdom of Asturias*: p 123.)

2. Pidal: vol 6; p 23.



become the nucleus of Pelayo's force. Furthermore, they elected Pelayo as *Caudillo*, or chief, rather than a new king to succeed the late king Roderic,<sup>1</sup> even though he has been referred to in places in Spanish history as king — the first king of Asturias. With his election as *Caudillo* began Pelayo's career as Father of the Reconquest. Pelayo was on his way.

We now come to the battle of Covadonga, an encounter impossible to describe with any degree of accuracy. Because of unreliable and exaggerated accounts it is not possible for anyone to narrate the course of this battle as a military historian, with details of movements, actions and results. It may not have been a battle in the first instance; it probably was not. Moreover, the area of operations is so tortuous — steep, close, mountainous terrain — that no maps can be offered to the reader to assist his understanding of the action.<sup>2</sup> What follows is an attempt by this writer to present a narrative of events which makes sense and in which the influence of pride and prejudice is reduced to the minimum. Before narrating the story, however, it would not be out of place to offer the reader some samples of the extreme and conflicting accounts by Muslims and Christians of what undoubtedly was a Muslim reverse. We will then proceed with a sensible, possible-and-probable account of the engagement.

Muslim historians do not acknowledge this as a defeat, however small it may have been. They have almost ignored the episode. All we know from them is, that "a wicked infidel" arose to stir up the Christians in Galicia; the Muslim forces drove the rebels from every place where they rose and reconquered Galicia until Pelayo was cornered in the mountains where he had taken shelter with 300 followers; the Muslims continued to press and kill the rebels, many of them dying of hunger, until only 30 men and 10 women remained, all the rest having perished or resubmitted to Muslim rule; those few wretches were barely surviving on honey extracted from crevices in the cave which sheltered them; because of the rough nature of the terrain and the difficulty of putting an end to the fugitives, the Muslims tired of the operation and left, saying with scorn: "Thirty wild asses! What harm can they do?"<sup>3</sup> Pelayo survived.

Spanish narratives, based on very early Christian sources, mainly *Cronica de Alfonso III* which was compiled at the end of the 9th Century, give a fantastic account of the operation. We are told that the Muslim force was 187,000 strong under Alqama, one of the best Muslim generals of the time; Oppas, brother of the late King Witiza and metropolitan of Seville, was also present with the Muslims to talk Pelayo into submission; the Muslims used catapults against the cave where Pelayo had taken refuge; the stones thrown by these machines rebounded at the cave and killed the Arabs themselves while the lances used by them wounded their own co-religionists; in the Christian counter attack which followed 125,000 Arabs were killed while the rest fled the scene of action but could not escape the vengeance of the Lord; while crossing the top of a mountain by the side of the River Deva, the mountain broke off from its foundations and hurled the Arabs into the river and crushed all 63,000 of them<sup>1</sup>

Rejecting both extremes of reporting, we now proceed with what is a more likely course of events, a logical reconstruction based on all available accounts, acknowledging the possibility of error but no burdening the narrative with notes and explanations.

It happened in the summer of 722 (early 104 Hijri) in the time of Anbasa bin Suhaim and before his conquest of Septimania and Burgundy.<sup>2</sup> Pelayo was at Conga de Onis. Fresh Asturian recruits incited by the new Christian chief, had taken to raiding Muslim posts in the region and generally trying to cause alarm and despondency. To a backward mountain people who were yet bold and freedom-loving, such a role came naturally. The insurgency, though limited in form, appears to have gradually spread in Asturias.

The Muslims had no intention of letting the insurgents get away with their mischief. On orders from Cordoba, Munusa came out of Gijon to operate against the rebels with all the forces at his disposal. He could not have had more than a few thousand men, certainly not a force in five figures because troops were needed for a

1. Pidal: vol 6, pp 26-28; Sanchez - Albornoz: *Kingdom of Asturias*: pp 75 - 76.

2. This is Maqqari (vol 3, p 17) . According to Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 29) and Akhbar Majmua (p 28) it happened 12 years later in the time of Uqba bin Hujijaj. The former year is generally accepted by Spanish scholars and this writer, although the possibility of the alternate being correct is acknowledged.

1. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Kingdom of Asturias*: pp 135-136.

2. Amateur strategists are not lacking who have invented and described in detail a narrative of battle which is not likely to prove acceptable to military minds.

3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 17; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 29; Akhbar Majmua: p 28.



major offensive in France and also for the maintenance of peace in other parts of Septimania. So Munusa, with whatever force was available to him and assisted by a subordinate general named Alqama, struck at the rebel forces and routed them. Every town and village in Asturias (Muslim historians called the region Galicia) was brought firmly under Muslim control and the majority of those taking part in the uprising were glad to lay down their arms and resume a peaceful life, including the payment of taxes to the Muslims.

Pelayo, with his guerillas sharply reduced in strength, fell back. His force consisted of both native Asturians and Gothic fugitives. He moved into the higher Asturian Mountains known as *Picos de Europa* (Peaks of Europe — about 40 miles south-east of Gijon) which are part of the Cantabrian range of mountains. The Picos de Europa, covering an area about 25 miles by 15 miles, are a massif of high, rocky mountains with steep precipitous slopes, narrow gorges, snow-covered peaks, twisting valleys and fast flowing mountain streams. It is awesome terrain, excellent for guerillas intent on making a nuisance of themselves and a nightmare for regular troops. It is a grand bulwark created by nature as an almost unassailable fortress.

Into this mountain fortress retired Pelayo. After him came the Muslims, still inflicting heavy punishment on the rebels. More and more of them surrendered and returned to their earlier allegiance to the Muslim state, until Pelayo was left with only 300 followers. With this small force he climbed a prominent hill named Mount Auseba, at the eastern foot of which lay a narrow valley with a small stream running through it.

Munusa now held back from the chase, not wishing to commit the bulk of his force in difficult hilly terrain nor considering it necessary to do so against the broken remnants of Pelayo's insurgents. He sent a regiment under Alqama with orders to get Pelayo (the governor's unwilling brother-in-law) dead or alive. This regiment slaughtered many of the fugitives on Mount Auseba and drove them down the eastern slope to the valley floor. There were now 30 men and 10 women left with Pelayo.

This narrow valley in which flowed a stream called the River Enna (now Rio de Covadonga) was flanked by high mountains intersected with ridges and spurs. It was ideal country for ambush and surprise attack by guerrillas who would get every help from nature in the way of cover and concealment. There was no room for manoeuvre, not even room to deploy a large body of

troops at one particular spot. (This writer having visited the place and examined the scene of encounter could not imagine more than a few hundred men deployed for action, and they would be cramped for space.)

Above the floor of this valley, where the slope of Mount Auseba is almost vertical, in the rocky face of the precipice, stands a cave. Its mouth is 100 feet above the valley floor and can be reached only with great difficulty. Pelayo and his faithful band, driven to desperation, fleeing from the mountain top with Alqama's soldiers close upon their heels, took shelter in this cave. This would be their last move, for they were trapped like rats in a hole from which there could be no escape. They were secure from attack, but they could not get out. This cave was known as *Cueva de Santa Maria* — a name probably given after the event and because of the event — and is now known as Covadonga, meaning the Cave of our Lady. The reference is to the Virgin Mary.

Alqama moved down the mountain to the front of the cave. The mouth of the cave was impossible to storm because of the precipitous nature of the approach. The operation called for mountaineering skill, virtually scaling the rock face. The Muslims could no more attack and capture the cave than the Christians could get out of it. So the Muslims settled down to a siege while the Christians tightened their belts. They had no food left; they were now living on honey which they could scrape from crevices in the rocky walls and ceiling of the cave. It would not last long. Patiently the Christians waited for death, or a miracle.

Then the miracle occurred, though an unimposing one. The Muslims ran out of patience. It had been a difficult operation in which, as they saw it, they had broken the back of the insurgency. The ground made further operations very difficult if not impossible. They may be stuck for a long time, watching 30 starving wretches who refused to come out of their cave while the Muslims could not get into the cave to put paid to their account.

Enough is enough, thought Alqama. He could think of better things to do than stay in this wilderness day after day, even week after week, "Thirty wild asses!" said the Muslims. "What harm can they do?"<sup>1</sup> With these words they left the area of the cave. Alqama cast a last contemptuous look at the mouth of the cave. Perhaps he saw the haggard face of Pelayo, staring with unbelieving eyes at the

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 17; Akhbar Majmua : p 28.



miracle of his attackers going away. And the Muslims marched away — straight into the jaws of an ambush.



It was the Asturian mountaineers lying in wait. It is not known how many they were and exactly where they were. This is not likely to have been a strategem of Pelayo because this Goth's strength lay in his courage and firmness of character rather than in military skill. No general worth his salt would voluntarily walk into a cave with an enemy blocking him in and where he would die of starvation in a few days. This gathering of Asturians was a spontaneous move. Like all mountain people they knew their fieldcraft, knew how to use ground, how to move fast over it and how to become invisible in the bushes and boulders strewn over the rocky slopes. Perhaps it was loyalty to the freedom movement, perhaps a desire for vengeance for comrades killed in recent operations, perhaps the hope of plunder, perhaps all these motivating factors put together which led to the ambush of the Muslims as they filed away from Covadonga in the narrow valley.

The Asturians fell upon the Muslims at a most unexpected place and a most unexpected time. A little while before the Muslims had been victors in the valley with the Christians cowering before them; now they found themselves assailed from flank and rear by hordes of screaming barbarians, many clad in animal skins. Panic gripped the force. Alqama responded to the ambush bravely but was killed and fell from his horse. The rest of the Muslims broke and fled wherever their instincts led them, meanwhile suffering even more losses at the hands of the sure-footed Asturians. It was a cruel blow. The major part of the regiment, however, was able to break out of the ambush and extricate itself, making its way to the River Sella, a few miles away from Covadonga, where it was safe again. The survivors of the regiment of Alqama made their report to their general.

Munusa was deeply upset by the bad news. It was the first reverse which the Muslims had suffered in the region and one of the very few in the entire war of conquest. It had not been caused by Pelayo who squatted half dead in his cave but by the hardly mountaineers who were much more difficult to fight in their mountains than the Visigoths in open terrain. It was not out of fear

of Pelayo but out of a reluctance to tackle the wild Asturians in their equally wild country that the Muslims decided to evacuate the territory. Munusa pulled out his troops from the Picos de Europa to west of the River Sella which flowed by Conga de Onis, the past and future headquarters of Pelayo. The Governor was content to watch Christian movements from west of this river, but there was no further movement, not while Munusa lived.



From a military point of view it was an insignificant action — a series of anti-guerrilla operations ending in an ambush. There was no battle and the Muslim losses were light, certainly lighter than the casualties which they had inflicted on the Christians during the entire operation. This may be the reason why the Muslims paid no attention to the affair of Covadonga and regarded it as no more than a pinprick in spite of a more serious view taken by the Muslim Governor of Asturias. It is difficult to imagine a fighting general like Anbasa, conqueror of Septimania and Burgundy, not taking the challenge of Pelayo whom he would regard as an upstart and not coming out with a large enough force to crush the insurgents of Asturias.

From a psychological point of view, as the local Christians saw it, it was a tremendous victory. For the first time they had fought a successful action against the Muslims who had broken and fled under the impact of the ambush, leaving their dead behind at the scene of action. The Asturians become the Fathers of the Reconquest (a title which they still claim with pride in Gijon and Oviedo) and the Goths seemed to awaken from a bad dream of unbroken defeat. The superstitious saw in Covadonga the intervention of supernatural powers: the Virgin Mary herself coming to the cave to save her faithful followers. The Christians were now to rise gradually from the position of prostration in which the Muslim conquest had left them to reorganise themselves, reform their army, rebuild their churches, restore their traditions and re-establish their control over areas contiguous to the Picos de Europa.

For Pelayo it had been a test of courage, a test which he passed with flying colours. He had fought with guts and determination, never giving up the struggle even to the extent of dying an inglorious death through starvation rather than surrender-



ing to an enemy he hated. He proved himself a worthy leader, fully deserving of the accolades showered upon him by Christian historians. After Covadonga he moved to Conga de Onis where he established the capital of his mini-state, a kingdom in embryo. Here he was joined by an increasing number of Christians — patriots, fugitives, malcontents, idealists, fortune-hunters, adventurers — all who were willing to follow their newly found leader in a struggle against the invaders of their land. From the humble cottages of Conga de Onis was to rise a new Asturian kingdom, the first to appear after the Muslim conquest of Spain.

Five centuries later a Spanish Muslim historian, Ibn Saeed, would lament: "The contempt shown by the Muslims for that cave and for the people who sheltered in it led to the conquest by the progeny of those very people, of our great cities, so that now even the beautiful city of Cordoba is in their hands."<sup>1</sup>

1. — Maqqari: vol 3, p 17.

### 3: ABDUR RAHMAN AND THE FRANKS

The Salian Franks lived on the banks of the Rhine where the river emptied into the waters of the North Sea. They were one of the Germanic barbarian nations. In the second half of the 4th Century AD they moved south-westwards and established several petty kingdoms or chiefdoms, one of the more important of which was the kingdom of Tournai (Soissons) ruled by Childeric.

His son Clovis (482-511) set out on a career of conquest and expanded his kingdom by subjugating most of Gaul, as France was then called. He vanquished the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine, defeated the Visigoths in Aquitaine and ended the remnants of Roman rule in Gaul. Once nothing more than a powerful barbarian chieftain, by the early part of the 6th Century Clovis had established himself as king of most of France except for Burgundy which would be taken a generation later by his son. He ruled his new kingdom from Paris and lay the foundations of three centuries of Frankish imperial rule over Western Europe. Clovis also became a Roman Catholic. The dynasty which he started was known as Merovingian, after his grandfather Merovitch, who had been the first great chieftain of the Salian Franks.

A hundred years later, in the first half of the 7th Century, the kingdom broke up into several principalities and the descendants of Clovis turned into lazy, incompetent figureheads while power passed into the hands of the Major Domo, or Mayor of the Palace, who was also the Master of the Troops and thus combined in his person the position of Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief. The king was given a country palace to live in from which he would emerge once a year to preside over the annual assembly of the Franks.

When Pepin II became Major Domo (679-714) he set out to restore the kingdom. He defeated all the rebels and all contenders and brought the former components of Gaul, including Aquitaine and Burgundy, back into the kingdom. Pepin ruled the entire kingdom. Before his death in 714 he threw his illegitimate son Charles into prison on the charge of murdering Pepin's legitimate son Grimoald.

On the death of Pepin the kingdom again disintegrated and its barbarian enemies once again raised their heads. Duke Eudes of Aquitaine declared his independence, as did the rulers of most other



principalities. In the turmoil which ensued after his father's death, Charles escaped from prison and before long had established himself as master of Paris. This was Charles Martel, the man who would spend most of his life campaigning against enemies and crushing rebellions. His career would be linked, though not happily, with Duke Eudes, ruler of Aquitaine and descendant of Clovis.

Aquitaine had declared its independence in 672, before Pepin II assumed power as Major Domo, but then Pepin came and broke its resistance and reincorporated it into the kingdom. Now again, hardly was Pepin's body cold in its grave when Eudes renounced his allegiance to Paris and made common cause with the Neustrians, his neighbours to the north, against the central authority of Paris. This time it was Charles who broke the power of the rebels. In 719 he defeated Eudes and the Neustrians in a battle near Soissons. Eudes was brought to terms but Aquitaine was not entered, largely because Charles had to rush off to the north-east to fight the wild Swabians, Thuringians and Alamanni, who were in fact no more barbarian than the Franks themselves. In 725 Charles was warring on the Danube when Anbasa marched up the Rhone.

Relations between Charles and Eudes continued to be poisoned by hostility and mistrust. Charles suspected that Eudes would take the first opportunity to declare himself totally independent of the Frankish kingdom (he was right) while Eudes feared that Charles would invade Aquitaine just as soon as he was free from the pressure of the barbarians (he too was right). Both were pressed on two sides by enemies and potential enemies: Charles by the barbarians on the north-east and Eudes in the south-west, Eudes by Charles on the north-east and the Muslims in the south. Moreover, Charles and Eudes were the two most powerful rulers of the Franks and this added an element of intense rivalry to the relationship.

To deal with the precarious situation in which he was placed, Eudes decided to resort to an act of classical diplomacy: neutralise one enemy with a peace treaty while concentrating his energies and forces to deal with the other. He turned to the Muslims for peace, and the Muslim he turned to was Munusa.



Munusa had been a Christian belonging to the Berber tribe

of Ghammara which inhabited the region of Tangier in the Maghreb. Having converted to Islam shortly before the Muslim invasion of Spain, he took part in the conquest under Tariq bin Ziyad and proved himself a fine leader of men. He was brave, strong and bold. In fact he was one of Tariq's most successful generals in battle, with a cruel streak in his nature which in no way clashed with his military duties. After the conquest of Asturias he was harsh in dealing with the Christians and, according to Christian sources, once burnt a priest alive.<sup>1</sup>

Once governor of Asturias, in the years following the operations of Anbasa in Septimania and Burgundy (725) and before Abdur Rahman launched his campaign against the Franks which will shortly be narrated, Munusa became the commanding general of the frontier of the Pyrenees. He had his headquarters at Libia, a strong fortified town in the province of Cerdania, which Muslim historians called Madinat-ul-Bab, after La Ciudad de la Puerta, and which is now identified with Puigcerda, a little to the east of Andorra.<sup>2</sup> From this mountain fortress Munusa watched the frontier and would now and then conduct raids into Aquitaine without coming into serious contact with the forces of Eudes. Thus he was known to the duke, who may also have had some knowledge of his character.

Eudes parleyed with Munusa. Where and when they met is not known. The duke wanted a truce with the Muslims so that they would not raid into Aquitaine or engage in any military activity detrimental to his territory. He knew that such a truce would be of no advantage to the Muslims because he had nothing to offer them in return for suspending their raids. So as an inducement he offered Munusa his daughter in marriage. This was Lampegia, a maiden of remarkable loveliness, famous for her beauty in the land.<sup>3</sup>

Munusa found the offer irresistible. His desire to possess the girl overcame any scruple he might have had about signing a pact with the infidel ruler without authority or permission from the Governor of Spain, especially as this pact would be clearly against Muslim interests. He accepted the offer of the duke and signed the truce, receiving in return one of the most beautiful young women of the time. She was a devout Christian, but in the mind of Eudes

1. Pidal: vol 6, p 415.

2. Conde: vol I, p 107.

3. Some historians have given her name as Numerance and Minine, while others maintain that these were sisters of Lampegia.



political and military interests took precedence over religious scruples. Thus Munusa, one of the ugliest men of his time,<sup>1</sup> brought a beautiful young bride back with him to his house in Cerdania.<sup>2</sup> The date of this event is not recorded but would be 731.<sup>3</sup> This was to prove the undoing of Munusa, but we will come back to him presently.



Upon the death of Anbasa bin Suhaim in the land of the Franks at the end of 725, Uzra bin Abdullah al Fehri took over charge as governor and commander of the army and brought the expeditionary force back to Spain, leaving garrisons at suitable places in Septimania.<sup>4</sup> For the next three years there was no Muslim operation in France except for minor raids such as those launched by Munusa. Uzra ruled for only two months and was followed by several governors, none of whom went into France. These governors, for historical record, were:

Yahya bin Salama	: March 726 (Shawwal 107 Hijri)
Huzaifa bin al Ahwas	: June 728 (Rabi-ul-Awal 110 Hijri)
Usman bin Abi Nis'a	: November 728 (Shaban 110 Hijri) <sup>5</sup>
Al Haisam bin Ubaid	: April 729 (Muharram 111 Hijri)
Muhammad bin Abdullah	: February 731 (Zul Haj 112 Hijri)

In April 731 (Safar 113 Hijri) Abdur Rahman bin Abdullah al Ghafiqi, one of the survivors of Toulouse and the temporary governor after the death in that battle of Samh bin Malik, re-emerged as governor of Spain.<sup>6</sup> He had been there all the time

1. Enan: vol 1, p 87.

2. According to some reports, Munusa captured the maiden in a raid, but these reports are discredited. It is not likely that he would sign a pact with the father of the girl already his by right of conquest when such a pact was entirely in the interest of the Christians and at the expense of the Muslims.

3. It is clear from the letter of Abdur Rahman to Munusa (narrated later) that the truce with Eudes was signed after Abdur Rahman became governor of Spain.

4. This governor's name is also given as Urwa.

5. Some writers have confused this Usman bin Abi Nis'a with Munusa, saying that the latter name is a Spanish corruption of Abi Nis'a (Conde: vol 1, p 103). This is incorrect, although such corruption of Arabic names did frequently occur. Usman bin Abi Nis'a was an Arab who was relieved of the appointment of governor and returned to Qairowan where he later died, while Munusa was a Berber and was killed in Spain, as will shortly be related.

6. Some historians have placed his appointment a year earlier.

but was now nominated to the office by the Viceroy of North Africa. The appointment was a source of jubilation to the Muslims in Spain and of relief to the Christians.

Abdur Rahman was one of the finest commanders of his time, one of the bravest fighters, one of the holiest and most celebrated warriors of Islam. His popularity among the soldiers was due to his courage and excellent military qualities supported by an apparently limitless generosity. Furthermore, he was held in reverence by the Muslims because he was a *Tabi*, i.e. follower of a companion of the Holy Prophet (on whom be peace). He had spent some of the years of his youth in the company of Abdullah, son of Caliph Umar, and would relate the traditions of the Holy Prophet which he had heard from Abdullah.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately upon taking over charge of his post Abdur Rahman applied himself to putting right the administration of the country which had suffered due to the indifference of some and the ineptitude of others of his predecessors. He toured the provinces, righted wrongs and dismissed corrupt officials. He was a just and compassionate man and paid special attention to the affairs of the Christians, restoring to their possession many of the churches which had wrongly been taken away from them.<sup>2</sup>

All this was in the nature of preliminaries. His main purpose was to fight the Franks and this desire burned like a smouldering fire in his heart — to win merit in the holy war and to settle accounts with Eudes of Toulouse. He had lived with this dream for many years, and now as Governor and commander-in-Chief he had the power to realise it.

Abdur Rahman set about organising his army and preparing for a great expedition into France. He wrote to the Viceroy at Qairowan for re-inforcements, specifying that only such soldiers be sent to him who were imbued with the spirit of the holy war. The viceroy called for volunteers and from these only those were chosen who would come up to Abdur Rahman's expectations. This body of men, consisting of Arabs and Berbers, was sent to Spain. Abdur Rahman sent them to Pamplona so that they would get used to frontier life and also because Pamplona was the place he had chosen for the concentration of his army before marching into France. The best part of the year 713 was spent in making these

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 1.

2. Arsalan: p 87; Conde vol 1, p 105.



arrangements. As the year neared its end, Abdur Rahman was ready to set off from Cordoba.

But first he had to test the Franks in Aquitaine. He would raid their land with small forces and keep Eudes occupied while he completed his concentration. To this end he wrote to Munusa, commander of the frontier with Aquitaine, to start operations and engage the enemy with raids until he had arrived with the main body of the army at the frontier.

This order was a bombshell to Munusa. He had hoped to remain at peace with his northern Frankish neighbour while enjoying his new bride whose possession was part of that peace. He had no qualms about breaking his truce with Eudes or even double-crossing him — his coarse nature was not sensitive to such things. What worried him was the love of Lampegia which he would lose if he broke the truce with her father and initiated hostile action against him. He was head over heels in love with the girl and for that love would go to any length, even to the extent of betraying his co-religionists. Consequently, he wrote to Abdur Rahman that it would not be right to launch raids into Aquitaine because he, as the commander of the frontier, had signed a truce with Duke Eudes, which precluded such raids. The provisions of the truce had to be respected.

Abdur Rahman already knew about the marriage of his general with the daughter of the duke and the fact that the general was deeply in love with his Frankish wife. There was nothing wrong or unusual about this because a large number of Arab and Berber officers had married Christian women from noble families. But he had no knowledge of the truce with Eudes and had never expected that Munusa would turn against the Muslim governor for that reason. Munusa's letter made him furious. He at once wrote back to say that the truce with Duke Eudes was signed without his knowledge and permission and was therefore invalid. The governor again instructed Munusa to get on with the task given to him.

Munusa now lost hope of dissuading Abdur Rahman from making war against the Franks. He himself would avoid participating in it for as long as possible, perhaps indefinitely, but his love for his new wife drove him to treason and treachery. It is possible that his being a Berber, many of whom resented the Arabs, had something to do with this. He wrote to his father-in-law and informed him of Abdur Rahman's designs against Aquitaine and the part which he himself had been required to play in the operation

but had refused to play. He put the duke on his guard.

It was not long before Abdur Rahman came to know of Munusa's correspondence with the Duke of Aquitaine. Munusa's position was clear: he was not going to carry out the raids ordered by his Commander-in-Chief. His crime was also clear: he had committed an act of treason in informing the enemy general about the war plans of his own superior commander. Munusa was a traitor and would be dealt with accordingly. Abdur Rahman picked an officer named Ibn Zayyan for the task, placed under his command a force of suitable size and instructed him to proceed to Cerdania and get Munusa, dead or alive.

Munusa had no knowledge whatever of the approach of the governor's force nor does he appear to have expected such a reaction from Cordoba. The first inkling he had that action was being taken against him was the arrival of Ibn Zayyan at Libia. Munusa was taken unawares and could not think of anything better than to get out of the fortress before they got him. Making hurried preparations, he slipped out with a small escort of soldiers and fled into the mountains. With him he took his beautiful bride who was the cause of all this and for whose sake he was sacrificing this world and the next. The party made for France where Munusa would take shelter with his father-in-law.

What followed was a close chase in the Pyrenees mountains, from hilltop to hilltop, from pass to pass and from "boulder to boulder". But the end was not far. We are told that because of the fatigue of the journey and the heat of the day, out of regard for his beautiful companion, Munusa was resting with her beside a fountain in the midst of a green and flowery meadow where large rocks gave cover and shelter to the fugitives.<sup>1</sup> Then suddenly, without warning, the party was assailed by the soldiers of Ibn Zayyan. The few men who were with Munusa saw wisdom in flight and took to their heels, leaving their master and mistress to their fate.

Here Munusa fought his last battle, in defence of himself and his lovely princess. In desperation he drew his sword as the soldiers moved in. Brave and strong as he was, he fought "like a lion"<sup>2</sup> until, pierced by many lances and covered with wounds, he fell dead at the feet of his attackers.<sup>3</sup> This would have been a moving story of

1. Conde: vol 1, p 107.

2. Arsalan: p 89.

3. According to one account (a less likely one) he was not killed there but threw himself from a high rock to the bottom of a precipice in order not to fall into his pursuers' hands. (Pidal: vol 6, p 415; Conde: vol 1, p 107).



love and sacrifice and a glorious end for a valiant fighter had he not been guilty of treason and treachery.

They cut off his head and brought it to Cordoba, along with Lampegia, and both were presented before Abdur Rahman. The governor was stunned by the girl's beauty. He said, "By Allah, I had not imagined that one could find game such as this in the Pyrenees mountains".<sup>1</sup>

He sent the princess to Damascus where she was married to a son of the Caliph.<sup>2</sup>

The death of Munusa, tragic but deserving, occurred at the end of 731. Soon after this event Abdur Rahman began moving his force to Pamplona, in Navarre, which he had chosen as a concentration area and from where he would launch his expedition into France. It is believed to have been the largest Muslim force ever mobilised for operations in France, an army of Arabs and Berbers, but we have no knowledge of its strength.<sup>3</sup> It was an army of horsemen, an entirely mounted force ideal for fast-moving operations in which the heavy Frankish bands would be helpless. It was an army of flying columns, of galloping squadrons, of parties of riders travelling faster than the news of their arrival and striking and vanishing before their victim could prepare himself for defence or ask for help.

In the spring of 732 (early 114 Hijri) Abdur Rahman moved his army across the Pyrenees through the Pass of Roncesvalles (where a half-century later the rearguard of Charlemagne would come to grief) and debouched in the plains of Gascony, south-west of Aquitaine. Abdur Rahman's aim was three-fold: to gain merit in the holy war, to avenge the Muslim defeat at Toulouse at the hands of Eudes and to confiscate the treasures of Gaul for the good of the faithful. With these aims in view he dispersed his squadrons on a wide front for ease of movement and ease of acquiring booty, and advanced northwards in the direction of Bordeaux. The Muslim horsemen swept across Gascony with little opposition from the Gascons or the Franks or the Visigoths who still lived in this once Visigothic territory. The army arrived at the south bank of the River Garonne, near the city of Bordeaux, to find the enemy

1. Conde: vol 1, p 108; Arsalan: p 89.

2. Ameer Ali: p 147.

3. Early Frankish sources give the impossible figure of 400,000, while certain unidentified Arab sources place Abdur Rahman's strength at 70,000 to 80,000 — still an impossible figure. (Enan: vol I, p 97).

waiting for it.<sup>1</sup>

Duke Eudes had already been warned by Munusa about the intentions and plans of Abdur Rahman. Thus he was not taken unawares. He gathered a sizeable army of Franks and Goths and prepared to meet Abdur Rahman at whatever place the latter should choose for a return match. Since Abdur Rahman had chosen Bordeaux as his line of advance, the two forces met a little south of that city on the left bank of the Garonne where Eudes had deployed his army to fight the invaders and save his city.<sup>2</sup> Eudes had wisely refused to be drawn into skirmishes and concentrated his army for a big battle at a place vital to him, i.e. Bordeaux. We are not sure whether Abdur Rahman went to Bordeaux because Eudes was there or Eudes went to Bordeaux because Abdur Rahman was coming there; probably the latter because the normal position of Eudes would have been his capital, Toulouse.

This was the moment Abdur Rahman had waited for — to avenge the blood of the faithful martyred at Toulouse — and the Muslims went into action with a vengeance. Unfortunately, we have no details of what must have been a fine battle. All we know is that Eudes was badly beaten, that his army was cut to pieces, and there was such havoc wreaked by the Muslims that the 8th Century chronicler-priest, Isodore Pacensis, would lament that God alone knew how many Christians were killed in that battle.<sup>3</sup> The duke was able to get away with a part of his army but was no longer in a position to face the Muslims in battle by himself.

After the battle the Muslims advanced to the city to find its gates closed against them. They invested the city and a few days later stormed it. Bordeaux was now theirs. Local resistance was broken and all who had resisted were put to the sword. Since the

1. This writer rejects the view of a minority of historians, based on a reconstruction by the French orientalist Cardonne, that Abdur Rahman first marched all the way to the River Rhone in Eastern France, crossed the river and laid siege to Arles, fought with Eudes and then marched to Bordeaux in Western France where he again fought and defeated Eudes. This is neither based on historical evidence nor makes military sense. In this matter of direction of the approach to Bordeaux, this writer has followed the opinion of a majority of historians, including Levy-Provencal, Hitti, Conde and Sanchez-Albornoz. Perhaps some scholars confused the movement of Abdur Rahman with operations conducted later by others, as narrated at the end of the following chapter.

2. Some writers tell us that Eudes faced the Muslims further back, on the bank of the River Dordogne at a spot 10 miles northeast of the city and not far from this river's junction with the Garonne. This is unlikely because Eudes would fight ahead of the city to save it rather than after the city had been lost and plundered.

3. Sanchez-Albornoz: Muslim Spain: vol 1, p 79; Enan: vol 1, p 90.



city was taken through fighting rather than under terms of surrender, it was sacked and a large amount of booty came into the conquerors' hands, including treasure hoards of gold and silver and precious stones.

It must have been at Bordeaux where occurred the episode recorded by Muslim historians as an example of the faith and generosity of Abdur Rahman, although the location of the place has not been explicitly stated. The conquerors had acquired among other things a golden idol studded with pearls and rubies and emeralds. It may have been a statue of Jesus. Abdur Rahman had it broken up, and after setting aside a fifth of its value as the share of the state, distributed the remaining four fifths among the men.

This got to the ears of the Muslim Viceroy of North Africa, Ubaida bin Abdur Rahman, and apparently made him very angry, though the reason for his anger is not clear. Either he thought that such a priceless trophy should not have been broken up but sent as a gift to Damascus, or he felt that Abdur Rahman had put himself and his men in unnecessary danger by penetrating so deep into the land of the Franks. He wrote a strong letter to the general with a stern admonishment. Abdur Rahman, devout believer that he was, wrote back: "Lo, if the heavens and the earth were sown up, Allah would still provide a way out for the God-fearing".<sup>1</sup>



Meanwhile Eudes was retreating north-wards with the remnants of his once victorious army. He was a bitter man. Having given his daughter in marriage to a Muslim general in the hope of enlisting Muslim friendship and possibly their help against Charles, his hated rival and potential enemy, he was now in the position of having been thrashed by those very Muslims and driven out of the best cities of his duchy. He had no option but to swallow his pride and turn in humility to the Major Domo of France, whom he now regarded as the lesser of the two evils.

Eudes wrote to Charles, as Frank to Frank: "What is this disgrace which has come upon us and which will continue to trouble our progeny? We used to hear about the Arabs and fear their coming from the East. Now they have come from the West, subduing the land of Spain and overcoming its great army and plentiful resources with their scanty numbers and poor equipment.

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 64; Ibn Abdul Hakam: pp 216-217.

They do not even have armour!"

Charles had by now completed his operations against the Germanic barbarians of the north-east and disposed of that threat to France. He was now free to engage other enemies; but he was not about to rush to Eudes' help. It gave him pleasure to see the duke humbled and his provinces wasted by a third party. He even hoped that the Muslims would succeed in getting their hands on Eudes and eliminating him altogether, so that he would be rid of this troublesome contender without himself lifting a finger. Moreover, he was wise enough to see that the more booty the Muslims acquired, the more it would burden them and the more vulnerable they would be, while at the same time they would be less inclined to continue their advance deeper into France, i.e. into Charles' territory. And if that booty was acquired at the expense of Duke Eudes and Aquitaine rather than his own, so much the better.

He wrote to Eudes: "It is my opinion that you should not oppose them in their irruption, for they are like a torrent which carries all in its path. They are now at the height of their success when their resolution is worth more than numbers and their valour does not need the defence of armour. Let them be until their hands are filled with spoils and they begin to vie with each other and fight each other. Then you shall master them with ease".<sup>1</sup>

While this correspondence was taking place Abdur Rahman had crossed the River Dordogne and was advancing northwards. He again divided his army into several columns which swept through the country striking at widely dispersed points at the same time and gathering more booty. The troops were elated by their success. They were a victorious army and desired only to be led on to further conquests by their indomitable commander who had given proof of his valour and military skill at every step.

Abdur Rahman's objective now was Tours, a city on the south bank of the River Loire, famous for its Church of Saint Martin. Saint Martin was a special saint of Gaul while his church was believed to contain fabulous treasure contributed as votive offerings by the Christians. Securing these riches would be a fitting end to a glorious campaign by the faithful. The Muslims got to Poitiers, 60 miles south of Tours, and burned a basilica outside the

1. Maqqari (vol 1, pp 274-275) gives this as an exchange between Charles and his followers. Fuller correctly interprets this as an exchange between Charles and Eudes.

city after taking possession of the wealth stored in the church. Then they marched to Tours and planted their standards under its walls. They would soon initiate measures to storm the city and take the treasure of Saint Martin as a prize of war.

It was at Tours that they received, soon after their arrival, the unexpected news that the "King of France" was advancing from the north with a vast army of Christians. Charles Martel was on his way.

#### 4: THE BATTLE OF POITIERS

Charles Martel was not looking for a fight with the Muslims. He had trouble enough on his hands dealing with his barbarian neighbours — Saxons, Thuringians, Alamanni and others — wild Germanic tribes like his own Franks but even more backward in political organisation and lacking in leadership. The Franks had seen enough of the damage done to Aquitaine by the Muslims, to discourage them from facing in battle the Muslim cavalry which had cut the army of Eudes to pieces. What Charles wanted was that the Muslims should ravage Aquitaine and humiliate Eudes, yet go no further. In other words, he wanted them to stop before they could enter his territory, which meant everything north of the River Loire. His aim was a limited one, to prevent the Muslims from crossing the Loire, but he was led on beyond that river by the religious desire to save Tours which was the spiritual capital of Gaul. On the latter point he might have been influenced by Eudes who had hurried to Paris and was able to secure a promise of help from Charles in return for submission to the authority of the Major Domo.

By now Charles had completed his conquests on the Rhine and the Danube and set about organising his army to face the Muslims, should they attempt a penetration of his territory. Eudes placed himself and his Aquitainians under the command of Charles, forming a division of the army which also had large contingents of the Germanic barbarians brought in from the north-east to strengthen the force. It was a multi-national army of Europeans, of men speaking many tongues.<sup>1</sup> The largest element of the army was the Franks, partly from Aquitaine but mainly from the north-eastern part of France known as Austrasia.<sup>2</sup>

These Franks, particularly those from Austrasia, were a wild lot, as wild in their appearance as in their nature. Most of them were clad in wolfskins with long matted hair hanging down over their shoulders.<sup>3</sup> They were big and strong ... "vast of limb and iron

1. Fuller: vol 1 p 345.

2. Austrasia covered roughly the region now occupied by Belgium, Luxembourg and the Rhineland.

3. Hitti: p 500.



of hand"<sup>1</sup> Of discipline they had none, being a disorderly and disobedient people, but the thirst for plunder which they would grab as readily from fellow Christians as from others kept them together and was about the only thing which kept them together under one general and one standard. Their military organisation was primitive, their military training no better. They would fight in unwieldy masses, poor in manoeuvring, negligent in matters of security, and would easily fall into confusion when surprised. They were mainly foot soldiers. Their weapons were a 3-foot long double-edged sword, a broad-bladed dagger, a barbed javelin for stabbing and throwing and two types of axes one for use in combat and the other, called Francisca, for throwing. The latter was a deadly and a characteristic Frankish weapon. They did not use bows.<sup>2</sup>

With this motley crowd of barbarians Charles set out from Paris. He approached the north bank of the Loire at Orleans where he crossed the river, then advanced cautiously along the left bank until he got to the vicinity of Tours, where his advancing hordes were spotted by the Muslims.



The Muslims were taken completely unawares. They had moved out from Bordeaux not as a compact body marching in tightly-controlled order but as a widely dispersed force of cavalry sweeping the country upto the Loire. The front of advance had narrowed down again near Poitiers and at this moment only the leading elements had arrived at Tours while the rest of the army was spread over the area between Tours and Poitiers. The former was the final objective of the expedition. From here, after picking up the riches of the Church of Saint Martin, the Muslims would make their triumphant return to Spain, laden with spoils taken from "the enemies of Allah."

The appearance of a reportedly immense force of Christians south of the Loire altered the situation. Abdur Rahman was surprised and not happy at this development. The army was no longer the lean, fast-moving force of light cavalry with which he had started the campaign. His units were burdened with vast spoils which they had gathered, loaded with booty carried on a large

1. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Muslim Spain* vol 1, p 79; Montgomery: p 149.

2. Montgomery: p 146; Fuller: vol: 1, p 344.

number of mules which accompanied the army, except for some part of it which the men kept on their persons or their horses. Weighed down with this loot, the army had lost some of the mobility which had been its greatest asset. Moreover, discipline too had deteriorated, which is inevitable when soldiers are given a free hand in looting. All this — the dispersion of the army, its attachment to the captured spoils and its weakening discipline — worried the Muslim commander.

The first step which Abdur Rahman took was to fall back from Tours in order to concentrate his army. The Muslims did not capture or sack Tours, although we have one report based on an unknown Arabic source to the effect that they stormed the city, slaughtered the inhabitants and looted its riches under the eyes of the approaching Christians.<sup>1</sup> In this matter the reports of Christian chroniclers who never fail to condemn Muslim depredations has to be correct. The city of Tours was spared the ravages of war by the timely arrival of Charles Martel.<sup>2</sup> We could, however, be wrong in this and some damage might have been inflicted on Tours by the Muslims before they pulled away.

Abdur Rahman concentrated his army about 40 miles south of Tours on the road to Poitiers. He had his forces together, directly under his control, but seeing the disorder in his once magnificent army, now sinking beneath the weight of the spoils of war, caused him extreme anxiety. The acquisition of booty had gone beyond the limits which he himself would have wished to set. Abdur Rahman and his more sensible generals disapproved of this state of affairs and the unseemly attachment of the soldiers to plunder, even if this was a form of remuneration in the absence of a regular salary. He seriously considered ordering the men to shed their burden of spoils, to see to their horses and weapons and concern themselves solely with fighting the infidel. But he feared that this would have a damaging effect and would be bad for the morale of the men. They would be extremely upset, even disheartened.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the men were in top spirits and did not regard the booty in their possession as an impediment. There were many officers too who shared the soldiers' confidence which had been nourished by good fortune and their unbroken string of successes during the entire campaign, especially the thrashing

1. Conde: vol 1, p 110.

2. Levy-Provencal: p 37.

3. Conde: vol 1, P 109; Arsalan: pp 83-84.



Map 2: FRANCE V-VIII CENTURIES



delivered to Eudes at Bordeaux. They never doubted that so long as they had a hero like Abdur Rahman at their head, a *Tabi* blessed by Allah for his piety — they would beat any and every Christian who dared to try conclusions with them. The army might have been weighed down with spoils but its spirits were certainly not weighed down by anything. The men were full of fight.

This excess of confidence soon affected Abdur Rahman as well. It allayed his anxiety. The thought never occurred to him that he could easily break contact with the Franks and retire southwards, back to Spain, with all the riches acquired in France. The heavy Frankish foot soldiers could never have caught up with him, had they even wished to attempt the unlikely course, and the Muslims would be safely back in Spain with the booty. But the spoils was not what Abdur Rahman had come to France for, nor was he going to let the soldiers think that this was the main purpose of the expedition. They had come for the holy war, and so long as there were enemies of Allah coming up against them it was their sacred duty to fight them, in the way of Allah.

Abdur Rahman prepared for a set-piece battle. He had all the baggage, which consisted mainly of spoils, placed in a camp in the rear and drew up his squadrons in front, facing the Franks who had just arrived.

Charles also organised his army for battle. It appears that he drew it up in the form of a Roman phalanx — a compact, solid body of infantry capable of withstanding attack from front and flank. For an unsophisticated nation this was the simplest and most easily controlled form of deployment for battle. One side or flank included Duke Eudes and his Aquitainians who were a little more advanced in their methods of warfare. Charles' intention was nothing more than to put up a front against the Muslims, to fight a defensive battle and beat off the attack. In this process he hoped to cause sufficient damage to the attackers to discourage them from any attempt at continuing their advance into the northern part of France. With a heavy infantry mass for his army, incapable of any form of manoeuvre against a mobile enemy, this was the best that he could do.

Thus the forces deployed for battle, the Muslim army of light cavalry facing north, the Christian army of heavy infantry facing south. The battlefield was south of the present town of Châtellerault and about 15 miles north of Poitiers, between the Rivers Vienne and Clain, both small rivers not much more than



streams. One historian has placed the probable location of the battlefield at the present village of Moussais-de-Bataille<sup>1</sup>. The two armies stood astride the old paved Roman road, because of which Muslim historians have called this battle *Ghazwat-ul-Balat*, the Battle of the Pavement. It was nearing the end of Shaban 114 (latter half of October 732).

For seven days the belligerents faced each other without any serious action. During this period there was light skirmishing, mainly Muslim mounted groups prodding the Christian front to test its strength and discover weaknesses. The Muslim light cavalry was armed with sword and lance while many horsemen also carried bows to pick off enemy infantry at a distance. This light, sporadic fighting led to no change in posture or disposition of the two fronts. The Franks waited patiently for the Muslims to do something.

The eighth day was the last day of action, a terrible day and the only terrible day in this battle. Abdur Rahman took the initiative and launched his cavalry in a fierce assault against the enemy. The Frankish front held. The Muslims repeated their impetuous, headlong charges, striving with lance and sword to break the formation of the Christians or drive a wedge somewhere in their front, but they failed to secure an advantage. The men of the north... "stood as motionless as a wall; they were like a belt of ice frozen together and not to be dissolved."<sup>2</sup>

The day wore on. The fighting increased in intensity. The thunderous charges of the Muslim cavalry, launched with the formidable impulse of the holy war, would have shattered any opposition in their path, but today they came to a grinding halt against the solid wall of barbarians. The phalanx remained unshaken. The Frankish infantry stood steadfast in the face of the terrible thrust of the Muslim cavalry. The field was covered with corpses as the Muslims felled a large number of Christians with sword and lance and the Christians caused equal bloodshed amongst the Muslims with javelin and battle axe. Charles appeared to be content to just hold his position and avoid defeat, for which he was willing to pay the price of heavy slaughter. He himself plunged into the fray, as brave as any of his wild warriors, and delivered such irresistible strokes in combat that he acquired the title of *Martel*, meaning *hammer*. He would henceforth be known as

Charles Martel... Charles the Hammer!

It was in the afternoon, while the battle was at the height of its carnage, that the situation turned. The next move was by Duke Eudes, in pursuance of a bold plan to take the pressure off the Christian front, a plan which he might himself have devised but which must have been approved by Charles. The Duke was fighting bravely on one flank of the Christian formation. Now spotting the opportunity, he advanced around the Muslim flank and made rapidly for their camp where all the booty was stored. It was meant as a diversion and produced an immediate effect.

The Muslims saw the move and understood its significance: the prize of the entire campaign was in danger. If Abdur Rahman had his way he would have let the enemy movement proceed and struck at the opening created by the separation of Eudes from the main body of the Frankish army. But Abdur Rahman was not to have his way. He never got a chance to do anything. Large bodies of Muslim cavalry instinctively broke contact with the Franks and hastened in the direction of the camp to save the precious booty. Eudes never got to the camp, he probably never intended to, but the departure of many of its squadrons from the field of battle threw the Muslim army into confusion and created a grave situation. Charles Martel took full advantage of it. The Franks began a forward movement and struck with increased force at the disorderly Muslim front, and the battle turned even more savage, even more brutal.

This was a most critical situation which faced the Muslims. There was confusion in their ranks with disorder mounting every minute. The cohesion of their front was broken with large gaps appearing in their line into which the Franks began to advance. It was now that Abdur Rahman showed his true stature as a warrior and a commanding general. He threw himself into the thick of the fighting and laid about him with his sword. He was everywhere on his horse, plunging into action where the combat was the fiercest, fighting with the bravest, exhorting his men and putting some order into the disorderly ranks.

This was Abdur Rahman's finest hour. It was also his last hour. Wielding his bloody sword like a shining hero, he slashed his way through the Frankish ranks and penetrated deep in the midst of the Austrasians — the North Franks. Here, sword in hand, his body pierced by many javelins, he fell from his horse. The noble Abdur Rahman drank the cup of martyrdom which he had eagerly

1. Levy-Provençal: p 37.

2. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Muslim Spain*: vol 1, p 79; Fuller: vol 1, p 345 (quoting Isidore Pacensis).



sought in a life time of campaigning against the enemies of Allah.

With the death of their commander the confusion in the Muslim ranks could only get worse. They fought on like the brave soldiers and holy warriors that they were and forced the Franks to pay a heavy price for the limited success which they were gaining, but the situation continued to worsen. It soon turned grim. Luckily for the Muslims, Charles had no deep design of conquest in mind. Even more luckily, night fell and darkness put an end to the pitiless slaughter. The day of horror ended.

At dawn on the following day Charles drew up the Franks and his barbarian allies for battle as on the day before and awaited the Muslim attack. He had always had a defensive battle in mind and the losses which he had suffered disinclined him towards any aggressive intent which might have crossed his mind. The Muslim camp was visible to the Franks and it looked as large and menacing as before. Charles was expecting the dreaded Muslim cavalry to appear on the battlefield at any time and unleash another sequence of powerful charges.

When many hours had passed without any sign of activity in the Muslim camp, Charles decided to investigate. He was still cautious. Suspecting that the lack of activity was an enemy ruse, he sent a few scouts forward to reconnoitre the camp and find out what the silence was all about. The scouts returned from their mission to report that the camp was empty. There were no Muslim warriors around. The birds had flown.

During the previous night the Muslim officers had differed as to the next course of action. The threat to their spoils had shaken those to whom spoils meant everything. The hideous carnage of battle and the loss of their beloved and honoured general had shaken everyone. Since the previous day's action had ended in favour of the Christians, the Muslims anticipated greater aggressiveness on their part and consequently a more alarming threat to themselves and their spoils. They had lost all hopes of victory, so they decided to abandon the scene of action as fast as possible. During the night they mounted their horses and rode away, in their haste leaving behind those of their comrades who were too badly wounded to travel. They left their tents standing, in order to deceive the Franks, and left the ground littered with baggage. They even left a good deal of the spoils behind, though how much was left and how much taken will never be known. The Muslim army, such as it

was, retired in the direction of Narbonne.

The Franks advanced to the Muslim camp. They butchered every wounded Muslim who had been unable to travel and was left behind. In the Muslim camp Charles gathered all the baggage and booty abandoned by the Muslims, distributed part of it among the soldiers and kept the rest for the use of the state. He made no attempt to follow the Muslims as a victorious force must do after a successful battle in order to complete the destruction of the retreating foe. He feared that this was a snare, that the Muslims would be waiting for him in an ambush as he came after them. (Indeed, this was a favourite strategem of the Arabs). Another reason for his not being more aggressive was that an infantry force cannot effectively pursue a mounted one. Moreover, Charles felt that he had done enough for Gaul and did not wish to push his luck. He had achieved his aim of preventing the Muslims from crossing the Loire and wasting his territory. It is also possible, as stated by an eminent military historian, that he hoped that the Muslims would remain in sufficient strength to continue to threaten Aquitaine and keep Eudes in a state where he would depend on Charles for survival.<sup>1</sup> So from Poitiers Charles returned to Paris and dismissed his barbarian contingents to their dark forests.

The battle of Poitiers was fought in the last week of October 732 (beginning of Ramzan 114 Hijri).

★

Western historians have gone into raptures over the victory of Charles Martel at Poitiers, perhaps because it was one of the very few victories the Christians could claim in generations of defeat at the hands of the Muslims. These historians have waxed eloquent, seeing in this battle the salvation of the west, the triumph of Christianity over Islam, the supremacy of the European race over the Semites, the survival of civilisation itself. The most imaginative has been Edward Gibbon, who could see in the possible defeat of Charles Martel, visions of Muslims marching to the confines of Poland and the highlands of Scotland, of the Arabian fleet sailing up the Thames and the Quran being taught at Oxford.<sup>2</sup> General J.F.C. Fuller has included this battle among his "Decisive Battles of the Western World."

1. Fuller: vol 1, p 346.

2. Gibbon: vol 6, pp 17 - 18.



It was nothing of the sort. It decided nothing. The importance of this battle, or lack thereof, has been correctly assessed by two famous men — one a soldier and the other a historian — as a defensive victory won by infantry in which the Franks did not really check the Arabs; the Arabs had merely travelled as far as their resources permitted....<sup>1</sup> The Arab-Berber wave, starting a thousand miles away at Gibraltar, had reached a natural standstill, lost its momentum and spent itself.<sup>2</sup>

In military terms it was a tactical defeat for the Muslims and a setback. Its apparent cause was the amassing of loot by the soldiers and their attachment to it at the expense of battlefield imperatives. The real cause, however, was the death of their commander. If Abdur Rahman had not fallen he would have resumed the attack and fought the battle, if not to victory at least to a draw. The actual results of this battle had little effect on future Muslim offensives in France. Had they won it, they would probably not have come this far again, not in such strength. Losing it did not stop them from launching expeditions into the land of the Franks. These operations continued, as narrated briefly at the end of this chapter.

In a psychological sense, however, Poitiers was a grievous blow to the Muslims. Never before had they lost so many men in a battle in Europe, since they landed on the coast of Spain 20 years before. The Muslim historians fell silent, as if the burden of loss was too heavy to carry or record or paper. But the tragedy was never forgotten. They called this action the battle of the Pavement, and they called the battlefield the Pavement of the Martyrs, after the paved Roman road astride which the two armies stood and fought. Three centuries later the Muslims in Spain believed that one could still hear, on the field where Abdur Rahman and his warriors fell, the voice of an invisible *Muezzin* calling the faithful to prayer.<sup>3</sup>



Charles Martel was undoubtedly the hero of Poitiers. He was not the saviour of Christianity or western civilisation, but he was the winner to the battle all the same. He had the courage to march forward to meet the Muslims when all others were fleeing from their

1. Montgomery: p 149.
2. Hitti: p 501.
3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 15.

path, and the resolution to stand and hold an attack under which all others had broken. If he did not exploit his success it was because he had neither the means nor the intention of doing so and perhaps also lacked the wide mental horizon which is the mark of a truly great military commander. He was a brave, determined, cautious and sensible general. For his personal feats in combat he earned the title of Martel, the Hammer, and was thereafter known as *Charles Martel*; for his victory on the battlefield he deserved the accolades which Christian historians have showered upon him. But these accolades came later; at first he was spoken of in evil terms.

Charles antagonised the Roman Catholic clergy after Poitiers by not returning to the churches and monasteries the treasures which the Muslims had taken in their successful sweep across western France. The bishops and abbots were waiting for their return, for after all much of the loot taken by the Muslims had been abandoned in their camp and recovered by the Franks, but the worthy priests waited in vain. Charles decided to use most of the recovered riches to reward his warriors, who had made the victory possible, and to repair the damage done to France by years of warfare with her enemies to south and north-east. This was an entirely laudable motive, entirely in the public good, for which the rough Frankish leader deserves all credit. But the clergy did not see it that way. They saw it as a sacrilege because it clashed with their interests, and they never forgave him for it. Thus we find, more than a century later, a letter to Lewis the Germanic, the great great-grandson of Charles Martel, in which the Bishops of Rheims and Rouen declare his ancestor damned...“that on opening his tomb, the spectators were affrighted by a smell of fire and the aspect of a horrid dragon; and that a saint of the times was indulged with a pleasant vision of the soul and body of Charles Martel burning to all eternity in the abyss of hell.”<sup>1</sup>

Duke Eudes too had played a distinguished role in this battle and conducted himself with valour, displaying high qualities of military leadership. It was he who led his Aquitainians forward and threatened the Muslim camp, which brought about a rapid change in the situation. After the battle he wrote a lengthy account of it to Pope Gregory II, in which he appears to have told the Pope that Muslim losses in this battle amounted to 350,000 against only 1500 lives lost by the Christians. Furthermore, he claimed to himself

1. Gibbon: vol 6, p 21. The letter was written in 858.

the honour of the victory, as a result of which the early French chroniclers, as an act of retaliation, levelled against Eudes the heinous charge of inviting Abdur Rahman to France in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

After the battle Eudes swore allegiance to Charles Martel and was allowed to return to his duchy as a more or less independent ruler. He re-established himself in Aquitaine. But he had less than three years to live. Upon his death in 735, his title and authority passed to his son Hunald, but immediately after that Charles Martel marched to Aquitaine and subdued it, probably to forestall any bid for total independence. Such a bid was indeed made later because we know that Charles Martel's son Pepin had to break the resistance of Aquitaine and subsequently incorporated the duchy permanently into the Frankish kingdom.

The war of Charles against Islam was not over. Two years after Poitiers, in 734, Yusuf bin Abdur Rahman, the Muslim governor of Narbonne, set out with a strong expeditionary force for the River Rhone, where he made an alliance with Duke Maurontius of Marseilles against the Franks and Burgundians. The governor of Spain then was Uqba bin Hajjaj. Yusuf crossed the Rhone and seized Arles, Avignon and St Remy. Two years later he advanced up the east bank of the Rhone into the province of Dauphine in the western Alps and sacked Vienne and Valence, while other columns took Lyons for the second time.<sup>2</sup> It was here that the Muslims came to know that Charles Martel was once again on the march, coming down from the north with a large army of Franks and Burgundians. It was now the year 737.

The Muslims fell back to Avignon and then to Narbonne, outside which they fought a stiff battle with the Franks in which victory went to the Christians. Charles Martel laid siege to the city of Narbonne but was unable to take it and retired, on his way back sacking and burning Maguelone, Agde, Beziers and Nimes. His apologists explain that he did this to punish the local inhabitants for submitting to the Muslims,<sup>3</sup> but the fact remains that the people of Septimania suffered much more grievously from the depredations of the Franks (whom they had always hated) than they

1. *Ibid.* p 20.

2. According to some sources the expedition to Dauphine was led by Uqba bin Hajjaj himself. It could be so.

3. Pidal: vol 6, pp 415-416.

suffered during the Muslim rule over their territory. Narbonne remained in Muslim hands and it was not till 759 that it fell, amidst great slaughter, to Pepin, his first siege of the city in 752 having failed.

Charles Martel died in 741 and his son Pepin III (known as Pepin the Short) became Major Domo of the palace.<sup>1</sup> Ten years later he put an end to the farce of the Merovingian kings ruling France. He deposed the last shadow king, Childeric III, and proclaimed himself King of the Franks, starting the Carolingian dynasty named after Charles Martel. We will come back in a later chapter to Pepin the Short.

1. Charles divided his territory among his two sons but the other, Carloman, went into a monastery and Pepin become sole successor.



## 5: THE CIVIL WAR IN NORTH AFRICA

The civil war in North Africa between the Berbers and the Arabs began in 740 (122 Hijri) and shook the world of Islam to its foundations. What we here call a civil war could be called by other names: a war as between two nations, or a rebellion of the subject Berbers against the ruling Arabs. If the Berbers had won we would have called it a "war of independence" and the history of Islam in North Africa and Spain would have followed a different course, even in matters of religious doctrine. Its causes were deep-rooted: racial, political, economic, religious, moral — each providing as good a reason as any for a clash of arms.

However, before we go into the causes of this civil war the reader should know something about the Berbers. This is important because the Berbers played a vital role in the history of Muslim Spain from the initial Muslim conquest to the ultimate Christian re-conquest.<sup>1</sup>

A good deal of research has been carried out on the Berbers by scholars and historians. Ibn Khaldun wrote many chapters on their origin, their tribal structure, their political and social organisation, their history, religion etc. Later scholars of the West have spent years labouring on this research. The picture of the Berber background and origin, however, is still not very clear and there is still much that is vague and possibly incorrect in our knowledge of this people.

The Berbers are not one race or one group of peoples. They comprise several groups which entered the mainstream of North African life, coming from many directions and interacting one upon another. They evolved into a group with more or less similar racial and cultural characteristics. The group eventually became the largest one inhabiting the northern zone of Africa from Western Egypt to the Atlantic, populating what are now the countries of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

Originally, it appears, the largest group which came to comprise the Berber nation consisted of Oceanic peoples. They came from Crete, Cyprus or Asia Minor, perhaps even from parts of ancient Greece. They came to Palestine as a maritime nation and

invaded Canaan in about the 12th Century BC. They were the Philistines of the Bible.

Eventually the conflict between them and the Semites culminated in a battle between King David and Goliath, the gigantic leader of Philistines. Goliath was slain in single combat by David, and as a result of their defeat the Philistines were forced to move out of the land. They came to Egypt, but their presence was not welcome to the Copts who drove them out of the country. They went to Barca, and here they split into tribes and clans, some settling down in Libya and others moving farther into the Maghreb until they reached the shores of the Atlantic.

Before they got to North Africa, however, there were European peoples already living in the region who fused with and became one with the new-comers. These peoples, taken as a whole, were the ancestors of the Berbers as we know them.

The Berbers are of Eurasian stock. They have Caucasoid features with brown pigmentation, often fair and even blonde, especially in the mountains of the Maghreb. At one time they spoke a Hamitic language which has come down to the present-day Berber language in its various dialects spoken from the Suwa Oasis in western Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean and from the River Niger to the Mediterranean Sea. Some Berber tribes are perhaps not Berber at all, e.g. the Kutama, the Sinhaja.<sup>1</sup>

In religion they varied. Many tribes were Jewish as a result of influences coming down from the days of Goliath. Many tribes adopted Christianity because of their contact with the Romans. Many were sun-worshippers. Some worshipped idols while yet other were pagans. They were inconsistent and wore their religion lightly, like clothes to be discarded when no longer needed. With the first coming of Islam to North Africa they accepted the new faith also, then reverted to whatever they had followed before. They would again become Muslims and again apostatise. They apostatised twelve times in the early Islamic period, and it was not till the time of Musa bin Nusair that Islam gained a permanent hold on the Berbers' heart.

The Muslims, fighting in North Africa, found in the Berbers the fiercest enemies they had encountered in their history. The courage and toughness of the Berbers, their resilience in recovering from one bloody defeat to come back for more, their tenacity in

1. The description of the Berbers that follows is taken from this writer's: "The Muslim Conquest of Egypt and North Africa:" pp 217-219.

1. According to Ibn Khaldun (vol 2, p 95; vol 6, p 177) these tribes are of ancient Arabian extraction.



opposing the Muslim advance, faced the Muslims with greater military difficulties than they had experienced in their wars against the Romans and the Persians. The Berbers proved themselves a valiant foe, but in the end they submitted to Islam. Once they had become Muslim, they rose again as the greatest holy warriors of the time.

Their name came from their contact with the Arabs. In Arabic the word *barbar* means to mutter, to make a noise which no one understands. There were many dialects in the Berber language and they kept talking and disputing with each other. The Arabs thought that no one did so much *barbar* as these people. The name stuck: Berber or, as now spelt in English, berber!

They were a brave people, warlike and chivalrous with intense tribal feeling. They were loyal to their chiefs whom they followed unquestioningly in war and peace. They were a fine-looking people with strong, handsome men and strong, beautiful women. They were men of the desert and the mountain, combining the characteristics of both. They were unfailing in their friendship, unforgiving in their enmity.

These then were the Berbers, fierce fighters and holy warriors of Islam. They had submitted to Islam and to rule by the Muslim Arabs on the understanding that they were participating in a venture as equals rather than submitting to a system as slaves or inferiors. They had intended to be equal in a religion which preached equality and brotherhood.



The Berbers had resented the Arabs for a century, ever since Amr bin Al Aas captured Tripoli in 643 and Abdullah bin Sad bin Abi Sarh invaded what is now Tunisia in 648.<sup>1</sup> They had fought several wars against the Muslims with rare courage and determination. They had stood up to face invasion after invasion, and with one exception had gone down before each, but they had gone down fighting. They possessed a resilience and tenacity which enabled them to rise after one bloody defeat to face another. It was not till the coming of Musa bin Nusair in 702 that the conquest of the Maghreb proved final and the region was established as a permanent part of the Muslim state.

1. These operations have been described in this writer's : "The Muslim Conquest of Egypt and North Africa."

This resentment was fuelled by what the Berbers saw as discrimination. It began during the conquest of Spain when Musa the Arab humiliated and ill-treated Tariq the Berber. Spain was conquered initially by the Berbers. They bore the brunt of the fighting and got a share of the spoils and other benefits of conquest, but the lion's share went to the Arabs. The fifth part of the spoils of war, earmarked by Quranic law for the state, went to Damascus to be spent in the Arab heartland rather than to North Africa to be spent in the land of the Berbers. In North Africa the Berbers lived as before, in the deserts and mountains, while the cities belonged to the Arabs. The Berbers felt exploited and increasingly conscious of an inferior status while the Arabs acted as superiors and masters. The pride of the Berbers continued to suffer as discrimination sharpened.

Damascus, the seat of the Caliphate, was now a city of luxury and splendour. The Umayyad court and the noble families of the Arabs enjoyed the fruits of the holy war fought by the faithful in distant lands. There was an increasing demand for wealth and women, especially the fair-skinned Berber girls who were prized for their beauty and would sell in eastern markets for a thousand gold dinars. Demands were made by the Caliph and nobles of his court upon the Viceroy of Africa and other functionaries of state, who responded readily to fulfil their masters' wishes, unmindful of the indignation and resentment created in the Berber mind.<sup>1</sup>

One Viceroy of North Africa, Ubaida bin Abdur Rahman, went on a visit to the Caliph in 737, taking with him a gift of 700 selected virgins in addition to eunuchs, horses and ornaments of gold and silver.<sup>2</sup> His successor, Ubaidullah bin Al Habhab, outdid his predecessor in indulging the tastes of the nobility of Damascus. The wool of the Merino sheep was highly regarded in the capital because of the perfect whiteness of the cloth woven from it. This viceroy confiscated and indiscriminately slaughtered the sheep of the Berbers, even though only on a single lamb in a flock of a hundred sheep was wool of the required quality found. This deprivity of the Berbers of their principal source of livelihood did not seem to concern the viceroy, nor the distress of the families whose wives and daughters were carried off to replenish the harems of Syria.<sup>3</sup>

1. Ibn Izari : vol 2, p 52.

2. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 217.

3. Dozy: p 128.



It was this Ubaidullah who launched the last major expedition into the Maghreb, bordering the Atlantic, before the Berber uprising. The expeditionary force was commanded by Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida — a befitting choice because he was the grandson of Uqba bin Nafe, the first man to conquer the Maghreb a half century earlier. This expeditionary force defeated all who opposed its march, invaded every tribe of the Maghreb... "achieving a victory as had not been seen before."<sup>1</sup> The army took an enormous number of captives, collected a great deal of gold and silver and other kinds of wealth, and returned as victors, laden with spoils<sup>2</sup> — to the delight of all but the Berbers.

Before the end of the first Hijri century a new religious element had come in to the life of the Berbers. This was the Khariji movement, a sect which had arisen during Muawia's revolt against Ali. These people were against both, i.e. Ali and Muawia, and had their own interpretation of the Quran for which they were dubbed as heretics by the orthodox Muslims. They were called Khariji because they were seen as being outside the pale of Islam. The movement continued for several generations in the Arab heartland in spite of bloody reprisals. Some groups, persecuted and hunted in the land of their birth, were driven to seek asylum in North Africa, where they took up their preaching with renewed vigour.

These people belonged mainly to two sects known as Abaziyya and Sufriyya.<sup>3</sup> They preached a socialist doctrine the thrust of which was revolutionary and democratic, upholding the equality of all Muslims regardless of their ethnic origin. Although they interpreted the Quran freely in accordance with their own thinking, "confusing truth with falsehood,"<sup>4</sup> they possessed a stern and fanatical thinking. The leaders of the movement asserted that any Muslim could become head of the Muslim state so long as he possessed the right qualities of virtue and leadership. They preached violence; they denounced their oppressors as heathens and called for a war of extermination against their rulers. They sought to shake off the tyranny of the oppressor in the name of the same God, the same Prophet and the same Holy Book whose help was invoked by those who oppressed them.

North Africa proved a fertile soil for the seed of discontent

1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 217.
2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 51.
3. Ibn Khaldun: vol 6, p 220.
4. *Ibid.*

which the Kharijis planted. The teachings of the newcomers got an enthusiastic reception among the Berber tribes for whom these teachings held a fascinating appeal. Large numbers flocked to their side, from Libya to the Atlantic, and most Berbers ardently embraced the new doctrine in the hope of seeing the dawn of a new era of equality and sovereignty of the people. A special moral and spiritual bond was created among the Berbers of North Africa.



The atmosphere of dissatisfaction was vitiated among non-Arab Muslims (and not only in North Africa) by Umayyad policy and Umayyad officials. The *jizya* imposed on non-Muslims, which was a nominal tax on able-bodied and earning males, had become an important source of revenue which was now threatened by large scale conversion. The government could have their money or their souls, but the Umayyads wanted both and continued to collect the tax from newly-converted Muslims. They regarded the financial income from unbelievers as no less desirable than the spreading of the faith. This practice was abhorred by the pious Muslims of the time, but it nevertheless remained in force as a matter of government policy.

It was only in the time of Caliph Umer bin Abdul Azeez, who has been mentioned in the first chapter of this book, that the evil practice was stopped. When the Governor of Khurasan complained that some people were taking to Islam to escape this tax and did not even get circumcised, the Caliph wrote back: "God sent Muhammad to call men to the true faith, not to circumcise them."<sup>1</sup> And to the Governor of Egypt who warned him that soon all would be converted and this source of revenue would be lost, the Caliph replied: "I shall rejoice if all *Zimmies* (i.e. non-Muslims under Muslim rule) become Muslims, for God sent the Prophet to be an apostle and not a tax collector."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately for Islam, Umar bin Abdul Azeez ruled only for 2½ years before he was dead. His loss was keenly felt by the Muslims irrespective of sectarian or tribal differences. One of the prominent opponents of the Umayyad dynasty said: "O son of Abdul Azeez, if human eyes could weep for anyone of the house of Umayya, these of mine should have wept for thee".<sup>3</sup>

1. Dozy: p 130.
2. *Ibid.*: p 123.
3. Conde: vol 1, p 93.



With the passing of Umar bin Abdul Azeez, the Umayyad administration reverted to its earlier harsh treatment of the Berbers. The new Viceroy of Africa, Yazeed bin Abi Muslim, a cruel and violent man who had been police chief under the infamous Hajjaj bin Yusuf in Iraq, re-imposed the *Jizya* on Berber Muslims as Hajjaj had done in Iraq on new converts.<sup>1</sup> He also announced at a congregation in the mosque that he would brand his Berber guards on their hands with the word "guard" on the left hand and the man's name on the right, so that they would be known by the people and instantly obeyed.<sup>2</sup> This was more than the Berber guards could take. They killed him in the mosque during the evening prayer. They also wrote to the new Caliph, Yazeed bin Abdul Malik, explaining what they had done and why they had done it, and reaffirming their loyalty to Damascus. The Caliph wisely accepted the profession of loyalty and said no more. This event took place in the year 102 Hijri (720-721 AD).

The last of the viceroys of Africa before the region exploded into civil war was Ubaidullah bin Al Habhab, who took over the appointment at the end of 734. He was a cultured and well-read man but no better in his treatment of the Berbers. His exactions from the Berbers to indulge the caprices of his masters in Syria have already been mentioned. He appointed his sons to various provinces as governors, including one named Ismail whom he sent to Tangier. With him, apparently as co-governor, he sent Umar bin Abdullah Al Muradi.

The last named was as vicious and as cruel as the worst of them and subjected the Berbers to barbarous treatment. He kept the pressure on and became steadily more ruthless. Then, at the end of 739, he announced that all Muslim Berbers would be regarded as a prize of war, as if they had been taken captive in a war of conquest, and that he would take a fifth of their number and of their property (the fifth was called *Khums*) as spoils of war for the state.<sup>3</sup> This had never been done before, never with Muslims, and even with non-Muslims only at the time of first conquest and only when they resisted the Muslims and were defeated in battle.

This was to prove the spark that ignited the war and led to years of indescribable horror and suffering, the wounds of which were not to heal for generations. The Berbers boiled with rage.

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 403.

2. Ibn Izari : vol 1, p 48.

3. Ibn Izari : vol 1, p 52; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 405.

They prepared for action, elected one of their number as leader and awaited the right moment to strike.

The leader chosen was Maisara of the tribe of Madghara. Once a water-carrier in Qairowan, he was now a soldier-priest who acted as head of the Sufriyya sect of the Kharijis. He was a bold and pitiless man. The Arabs called him Maisara the Vile.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of interest for students of Muslim history, one of the principal officers and supporters of Maisara was Tareef bin Malik the Berber chieftain who landed at the coast of Spain at a spot thereafter called Tareefa a year before the invasion of the country by Tariq bin Ziyad. Tareef had been the first Muslim to set foot in western Europe.



The right moment to strike came in early 740 (122 Hijri) when the Viceroy at Qairowan, blissfully unaware of the gathering storm, sent off a large force to raid the island of Sicily. As commander of the force he again appointed Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida, who had recently returned from the operation in the Maghreb. Habeeb and his son Abdur Rahman — both brave and ambitious generals — landed at the coast of Sicily, broke up all opposition and laid siege to the capital, Syracuse. The city surrendered on terms and was left in peace. No sooner had the Muslims entered Syracuse than they received an urgent summons from the Viceroy to return to the mainland.

The departure of Habeeb for Sicily was the moment the Berbers had been waiting for. They knew that a sizeable part of the Arab army of North Africa had left the mainland to go across the ocean to raid an island. That task would keep the force occupied for some time, and while it remained in Sicily the opposition on the mainland would be manageable. The Berbers went into action. Maisara struck at Tangier where the Arabs resisted but were overcome. The ferocious Berbers not only killed the governor, Umar bin Abdullah — who only got what he deserved — but also put to the sword every Arab who fell in their hands, not sparing even children. Maisara appointed as governor of Tangier a man known as Abdul A'la bin Jurajj the African, a fellow who was actually a Roman and had once been a captive of Musa bin Nusair.<sup>2</sup>

1. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p. 52

2. Ibn Khaldun: vol 6, p 221; Ibn Abdul Hakam : p 218. Jurajj is Arabic for Cyrus.



Next Maisara marched to Sus, the south-western part of the Maghreb ruled by the Viceroy's son, Ismail. Here too the governor was killed and every Arab put to death. Now all the Maghreb was up in arms. The conflagration spread like wild fire across the west and claimed every town and settlement where Arabs lived. A simultaneous uprising of Berber clans overpowered the Arabs everywhere and slaughtered all who were not quick enough to get away. Those lucky to escape fled the Maghreb and made their way to Qairowan, abandoning the country which their forbears had taken generations to subdue.

This was the first round of the civil war, won by the Berbers. In a matter of a few months the western part of the Maghreb had been re-conquered by the Berbers from the Arabs. At a great gathering of the clans Maisara was elected commander-in-chief by the Berbers who took the oath of allegiance to him. He proclaimed himself Commander of the Faithful (the title of the Caliph) and they began to call him *Ameer-ul-Gharb*... "the Commander of the West."<sup>1</sup>



The Viceroy at Qairowan sent a frantic message to Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida to evacuate Sicily and return with all speed to fight the rebels. He sent another message to the governor of Spain, Uqba bin Hajjaj, to come to the help of the Arabs in the Maghreb. And he organised the remaining Arab units in Africa into an army under the command of Khalid bin Abi Habeeb, who belonged to the same family as the Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida now fighting in Sicily. This last mentioned force had the distinction of having in its ranks a large number of noble Arabs — knights and cavaliers of the best families including the Quraish of Mecca and the Ansar of Madina. This army was sent off from Qairowan with the task of dealing with Maisara and putting a bloody end to his rebellion. It would be joined later by the expeditionary force returning from Sicily.

The first action in this series of operations was that of Uqba bin Hajjaj of Spain, though the timing and exact location of the action are not certain. He marched with a force of cavalry from Cordoba, landed on the African coast and played havoc with a few Berber groups which opposed him. All were beaten and driven into the desert by Uqba. Then he went back to Spain. Just how this

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 70; Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 53; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 405.

fitted into the overall picture of the civil war is not clear. Perhaps the instructions to Uqba were vague and left everything to his discretion. Perhaps he feared an uprising in Spain and hastened back to forestall it. If this were so then his apprehensions would be correct, because the civil war would shortly spill over into Spain.

Khalid bin Abi Habeeb advanced with his newly formed army to Teehart and camped by the River Shalaf which flowed under the city. This was near the border — vague and undefined — between Afriqia and the Maghreb and just inside the Maghreb. For a few days Khalid rested his men. Then he advanced deeper into the Maghreb and at the outskirts of Teehart came up against Maisara the Vile who was waiting for him with the bulk of the Berber army. Here the two armies fought a hard battle which raged all day and ended at night-fall without decision.

During the night, for some reason, Maisara left the camp while his army rested and returned to the city of Tangier. On return his fickle followers, taking exception to his conduct, fell upon him and killed him. There may have been more to this episode which the early historians have not recorded. However, in Maisara's place the Berbers chose as their commander Khalid bin Humaid of the tribe of Zannata. This Khalid was a much abler general than Maisara and at once set about preparing a brilliant stroke for the second day of the battle.

In the morning the struggle was resumed between the Arab army of Afriqia and the Berber army of the Maghreb, both commanded by Khalids. While the fighting was at the peak of its fury the Arabs were suddenly hit in the rear by powerful division of cavalry under the personal command of Khalid bin Humaid. Surprise was complete. The Arabs lost their balance and never regained it. Their army was crippled, overwhelmed, cut to pieces. Khalid bin Abi Habeeb and his Arab officers, brave and honourable to the last, disdained flight and fought to the last, every one of them laying down his life with bloody sword in hand. The flower of Arab chivalry perished in the battle, as a result of which it came to be known as the Battle of the Nobles. It was fought some time in early 123 Hijri (end 740 - beginning 741).

Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida, hastening back from Sicily, arrived at Teehart and heard of the disaster which had befallen the Arabs at Tangier. He remained at Teehart, unwilling to risk an encounter with the victorious Berbers.



The Berber revolt now became a full-scale civil war which spread across the Maghreb. Places which had hitherto known racial harmony exploded in violence. Arab officers and others suffered grievously at the hands of the Berbers and those lucky enough not to be caught and killed were fleeing headlong to Qairowan. This was the second round of the civil war, also won by the Berbers.

Meanwhile, there was turmoil in Qairowan. The Arabs were indignant at what had happened to their brothers at Tangier. There was hardly a family which had not lost a dear one at the Battle of the Nobles. The populace rose against the Viceroy and drove him from office and out of the town. The departing Viceroy, Ubaidullah bin Al Habhab, now a broken man, left for Damascus in April 741 (Jamadi-ul-Awwal 123 Hijri).<sup>1</sup>

There was alarm and despondency in the capital. The Muslims watched nervously as the Berber threat loomed larger and awaited the coming of a new viceroy with a fresh army to save Afriqia from the oncoming Berber hordes.

At Damascus, Hisham bin Abdul Malik, one of the ablest of the Umayyad rulers, heard with rising anger the accounts of the battle which had decimated his Arab cavaliers and humiliated all Arabia. "By Allah!" The Caliph swore, "I shall show them the wrath of the Arab. I shall send against them an army whose van will be with them while its rear is still with me!"<sup>2</sup>



A new army was hurriedly raised in Syria. Its strength was 12,000 of whom 10,000 were hard core Bani Umayya.<sup>3</sup> Other figures indicate that there were 6,000 proper Syrians plus 3,000 Arabs from the district of Qinassareen.<sup>4</sup> The Caliph appointed Kulsum bin Iyaz of the tribe of Qushair as commander of the new army and Viceroy of Afriqia and the Maghreb, and gave him the mission to re-conquer the Maghreb and re-establish Muslim rule over the territory. Kulsum was an old man and the caliph had the foresight to lay down an order of succession. In the event of

1. According to some sources the Caliph himself dismissed Ubaidullah bin al Habhab and recalled him because of the Arab failure in the Maghreb.
2. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 70; Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 54.
3. Ibn Izari: vol 1, pp 54-55.
4. Akhbar Majmua p 31.

Kulsum being killed or otherwise incapacitated, the command of the army would devolve upon his nephew, Balj bin Bishr, and if the latter were killed, upon Sa'laba bin Salama.<sup>1</sup>

The army marched from Syria in May 741 (Jamadi-ul-Akhir 123 Hijri). On his way Kulsum picked up contingents of Arab warriors from Egypt and from Barqa and Tripoli (in present day Libya) and arrived in the vicinity of Qairowan during Ramzan (July-August). The force remained here for a month to rest and re-organise, and celebrated the festival of Id-ul-Fitr (August 19, 741) which marks the end of the month of fasting.

Soon after its arrival there was a war of words between Syrian and African Arabs, the cause of which was the arrogant and hot-headed behaviour of Balj, the second-in-command. This led to a stern letter from Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida who was camped at Tilimsan in the eastern part of the Maghreb, from where he kept watch over Berber movements. Habeeb threatened to turn his arm against the Syrians if Balj were not controlled. Kulsum, the ageing commander of the Syrian force, made his excuses and the crisis passed.

The army marched on to Tilimsan where it joined the force under Habeeb, bringing the total strength of the Army to 30,000.<sup>2</sup> Here again the crude and aggressive behaviour of Balj led to trouble. There was almost a duel between him and Habeeb and Kulsum nearly had another civil war on his hands, this time between the Syrians on one side and the Egyptians and Africans on the other. Wiser counsels prevailed and an armed clash was narrowly averted, but the bitter sentiment of discord sown by Balj continued to poison relations between the two groups. According to some accounts Kulsum himself joined in the war of words and used insulting language towards Habeeb. This discord was one of the causes of the military debacle which followed.

The next march, in which Balj and his Syrian cavalry led the advance, took the Arabs to the region of Tangier, where a vast Berber army awaited their coming under Khalid bin Humaid, the victor of the Battle of the Nobles. Various names have been given

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 20; Akhbar Majmua : p 30. One historian (Ibn Izari. vol 1, p 54) says that Balj was a cousin of Kulsum. He is more likely to have been his nephew.
2. Some accounts have given the exaggerated figure of 70,000, which is clearly impossible (Maqqari: vol 3, p 20; Akhbar Majmua: p 31.)



for the place where the forthcoming battle was fought: Matluba,<sup>1</sup> Baqdura,<sup>2</sup> Valley of Subu or Sebu,<sup>3</sup> Valley of Suwa.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint its exact location. There is a small river named Sebu flowing by the present Fez and it is reasonable to assume that the battle was fought in this area, in the vicinity of a town or village called Baqdura. Since this falls within the district of Tangier, it would not be incorrect to call this the Battle of Tangier.

On this battlefield, in Zul Haj 123 Hijri (October-November 741) 30,000 sophisticated, well-equipped Arabs faced a countless horde of ill-armed Berbers, most of whom were naked above the waist.<sup>5</sup> The Arabs suffered a crushing defeat. We are told that a third of their number perished, a third was taken captive and only a third got away. Kulsum and Habeeb and a large number of Arab officers lost their lives. The Egyptian and African survivors made their way back to Qairowan while the Syrian cavalry numbering 10,000 under Balj, himself wounded, was cut off from the rest and had to retire northwards in the direction of Ceuta, closely pursued by the Berbers.

Balj had to fight several actions outside Ceuta to beat off Berber attacks, in most of which the Arabs got the better of their opponents, but eventually he was driven into the town. Luckily for the Arabs, this was an extremely difficult place to attack because of the design of nature and the skill of man; it was built on a promontory jutting out into the sea and had been well fortified by engineers of past generations. In Ceuta, Balj and his Syrians found refuge. Their joy was short-lived, however, because soon after their arrival they discovered that there were few provisions in the town and the Berbers came and destroyed the crops and other sources of food outside the city walls. If the siege continued for a long time they would be starved into submission. With Balj were present two distinguished persons: a friend, his designated successor: Sa'laba bin Salama, and a foe — Abdur Rahman, son of the Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida who had been killed in the recent ill-conceived and badly fought battle.

This was the third round of the civil war, also won by the Berbers.



1. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 218.
2. Akhbar Majmua: p 32.
3. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 55; levy-Provencal: p 28.
4. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 406.
5. Ibn Abdul Hakam: p 219.

While Kulsum was marching to meet his unhappy end near Tangier, groups of Berbers had risen in other parts of North Africa against their Arab rulers. One group of heretics attacked Qairowan but was beaten off. Tareef bin Malik, the first Muslim to set foot in Spain before the invasion of Tariq, was present with this group, but after its repulse at Qairowan retired to Tamasna in the Maghreb where he was elected chief and ruled over his tribe for several years before his death. His sons and their sons were to continue the struggle against the Arabs in North Africa.

Immediately after this incident another large Berber force assembled at Gabes, south of Qairowan, under a chieftain named Ukkasha bin Ayyub. The small garrison of Qairowan marched out bravely to crush the rebels but got crushed itself and its remnants came streaming back to Qairowan where they locked themselves behind fortifications. This happened at the end of 123 or in the early weeks of 124 Hijri (which began on November 15, 741). The picture was dark indeed for the Arabs in Qairowan.

By now the Caliph had appointed a new Viceroy for Africa and the Maghreb — a brave soldier and virtuous Muslim named Hanzala bin Safwan who before this appointment had been Governor of Egypt. Hanzala set out with another army and arrived at Qairowan in Rabi-ul-Akhir 124 Hijri (February-March 742). If the situation was desperate a few months earlier it was still more desperate now. The Arabs found themselves hemmed in by two vast hordes: one under Ukkasha camped a few miles south at Al Qarn, and the other under Abdul Wahid bin Yazeed camped a few miles north at Al Asnam. This Abdul Wahid had recently declared himself Caliph at Tunis. Both forces were eagerly preparing to storm Qairowan and sack the Muslim capital of North Africa, but the rivalry between the two commanders prevented them from coordinating their activities with each other.

Hanzala adopted the bold and classical strategy of attaching his enemies one by one. He assembled every able-bodied man, and even many women who would act as a reserve, and fell upon Ukkasha's force, defeating it and driving it away with much slaughter. Next he turned against Abdul Wahid without a moment's delay and Abdul Wahid's force also bit the dust in a sanguinary contest. Both rebel commanders were killed and their followers scattered after losing, according to one source, the unbelievable number of 180,000 men.<sup>1</sup>

1. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 58.



This was the first Arab success since the civil war began two years before. This was the fourth round of the civil war, won by the Arabs.



The civil war in North Africa was shortly to take a new turn, thanks to the misplaced ambition, energy and skill of Abdur Rahman, son of Habeeb bin Abi Ubaid who had fallen with Kulsum at Tangier. Abdur Rahman had survived that battle and in the retreat found himself with the Syrians of Balj, a man whom he intensely disliked. With Balj he went to Spain (as narrated in the following chapter) and stayed there in the hope that some opportunity would present itself which he could exploit to gain control of Spain, in the conquest of which his father had been one of the principal officers of Musa bin Nusair. The lack of such an opportunity left him frustrated, and two years later he returned to Africa. He landed at Tunis in January 744 (Rabi-ul-Awal 126 Hijri).

Here he dropped all pretence of friendship and loyalty to the Viceroy and made a bid for power. He called the people to follow him and acknowledge him as master. This the people of Tunis and the neighbouring districts did, partly out of admiration for his sterling military qualities and partly because of the great respect in which his family was held in North Africa. Abdur Rahman sent word to the Viceroy that he was taking over and would tolerate no opposition. At first Hanzala thought to march against him but was deterred by two factors: his aversion to shedding Muslim blood and the deteriorating situation of the Umayyad Caliphate in Syria. Unwilling to start another civil war, he left Qairowan in March 744 (Jamadi-ul-Awwal 126 Hijri), accompanied by a group of like-minded comrades, with the intention of returning to Damascus.<sup>1</sup> While leaving Qairowan he prayed to God and cursed Abdur Rahman and the people of Afriqia. Hanzala was a devout and pious Muslim about whom it was believed that his prayers were always answered.<sup>2</sup> In this instance the curse of Hanzala was followed by seven years of famine and pestilence and many more of the cruel strife which had already taken countless lives.

1. Some historians have placed this event a year later (Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 60).
2. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 60.

A month after the departure of Hanzala, Abdur Rahman rode in triumph to Qairowan. Many people remembered with joy and satisfaction that it was his great-grandfather, Uqba bin Nafe, who had built the city three generations earlier.<sup>1</sup> The Caliph at Damascus, Marwan, the Ass, who would be the last ruler of the Umayyad dynasty, was too beset with problems nearer home to worry about North Africa. He accepted the change at Qairowan as a *fait accompli* and confirmed Abdur Rahman in the appointment of Viceroy of Africa and the Maghreb. Later, when the Umayyad Caliphate fell and the Abbasids came to power, Abdur Rahman would respond by sending an affirmation of loyalty to Al Safah, the new Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad.

But Abdur Rahman was to have no peace. The civil war continued not only between Berber and Arab but also between Arab and Arab. The new Viceroy and his generals were always on the move, rushing from battlefield to battlefield, suppressing one rebellion after another and re-establishing control over North Africa. They had to recover Tripoli, Tilimsan and many other places where the Berbers had siezed power. In between these operations Abdur Rahman found time to launch raids on Sicily, Sardinia and the south coast of France. Everywhere that he and his generals marched their efforts were crowned with success and their enemies were defeated, but yet other enemies would arise to dispute their authority. Abdur Rahman would subdue Afriqia and the Maghreb only to find them breaking up again in revolt. This was to remain the pattern for the rest of his life until his violent end, at the hands of his own brothers, ten years after coming to power.

The civil war was to continue for several generations. However, we are no longer concerned with the affairs of North Africa. We will now leave this Abdur Rahman to his triumphs and his trials, but will come back to him again while following the wanderings of another Abdur Rahman, the Fugitive Prince.

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1. The construction of Qairowan is described in this writer's: "The Muslim Conquest of Egypt and North Africa."



## 6: THE CIVIL WAR IN SPAIN

During the eight years which elapsed between the Battle of Poitiers and the start of the civil war in North Africa, there was little peace for the Muslims in Spain. The new governor, Abdul Malik bin Qatan, had his work cut out suppressing the rebels in the northern mountains, who, emboldened by the Christian victory in France, had made a bid for independence. The first to take advantage of Muslim discomfiture was Pelayo, *Caudillo* of the Asturians. He sallied out of the Picos de Europa to raid far and wide in the province of Asturias. In sympathy with this movement the Christians in Vasconia also rose against the Muslims, and Pamplona broke the pact which it had made with the conquerors at the time of the first Muslim conquest.

In 733, the year following Poitiers, Abdul Malik carried out extensive operations in the north. Vasconia was subdued, the Basque rebels were dispersed with heavy loss, Pamplona was re-conquered and now garrisoned by the Muslims. In Asturias Pelayo's guerillas were fought and driven from every hill and valley untill their chief was forced to retreat to Conga de Onis, ready to scurry back into the Picos de Europa should the Muslims come any closer. The Muslims did not press further because of the difficult nature of the terrain. Instead, they marched into France to raid Septimania, but here success eluded them. As a further setback, on the return march through the Pyrenees, Christian mountaineers harassed the Muslim column and caused some loss.

The Muslims in Spain soon tired of the new governor whom they found to be a harsh and cruel ruler.<sup>1</sup> Abdul Malik had brought the Muslims no great success beyond keeping the rebels in check. The campaign in France ended on an unhappy note and the people began to believe that he was born under an evil star and would do Spain no good. They complained about this to the Caliph at Damascus who ordered the governor's dismissal. In his place the Viceroy of North Africa appointed a new governor of Spain, one named Uqba bin Hajjaj, who took up his appointment in November 734 (Shawwal 116 Hijri). Uqba found Abdul Malik to be the victim of ill fortune rather than guilty of bad leadership, and in order to do justice to an unlucky general, sent him to the north to command the Pyrenees frontier.

Uqba was a bold and dedicated soldier who spent a good deal of his time in Septimania, strengthening the fortifications of Narbonne and raiding into Burgundy. When not operating in Septimania and Burgundy, he was chasing guerillas in the Asturian Mountains. He could not, however, lay his hands on Pelayo, who would retreat into his mountainous stronghold when pressed and come out again as the pressure relaxed. The rebellion in the north was still simmering when Uqba had to cross to North Africa to deal with the Berber rebels, as narrated in the preceding chapter.

Some time after his return to Spain, Uqba fell seriously ill. Feeling certain of impending death, he appointed Abdul Malik as his deputy. Uqba died at Carmona in January 741 (Safar 123 Hijri) and Abdul Malik found himself governor of Spain for the second time.<sup>1</sup> Because of the civil war raging in North Africa, no one in higher authority had time to decide whether or not Abdul Malik should remain governor of the country from which appointment he had been deposed more than six years before.<sup>2</sup>

Only eight or nine months had passed since his resumption of power when Abdul Malik received a piteous call for help from Balj who was besieged in Ceuta by the Berbers after the defeat of the Arabs in Tangier. Balj and his Syrian soldiers were dying of hunger. Could they cross over to Spain to take refuge with their Arab brethren? Abdul Malik's reply was a clear and categorical NO! The Syrians could stay in Ceuta and starve to death, or meet an honourable end at the hands of the ferocious Berbers.



Before we take up the course of the civil war in Spain, it is important for the reader to know something about the underlying causes of the conflict. These were the deep tribal divisions in Arab society, some of them existing since time immemorial, others rising from more recent events. The matter is a complicated one, with complex ramifications, but here only certain basic facts are offered

1. According to some sources Uqba died at Cordoba.
2. There are various reports about the death of Uqba, ranging from his falling a martyr in France (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 29) to his being deposed by the people or by Abdul Malik and being killed (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 30; Maqqari: vol 1, p 236). Here we have accepted the most likely version of events (Dozy: p 138; Conde: vol 1, p 118; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 309; Maqqari: vol 1, p 236). There are also conflicting reports about the date of his death, varying from 121 to 123 Hijri. The correct date is the last one which fits in the sequence of events of the civil war in North Africa.

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 236.



to the reader in order to enable him to understand the course of the war without getting immersed in detail and confused in the process.

Originally, the Arabs belonged to two different stocks. There were the Southern Arabs, with the Yemen as their cradle, who were descended from Qahtan (Joktan of the Bible - Genesis: 10:25).<sup>1</sup> There were the Northern Arabs, inhabiting the Hejaz and Central Arabia, who were descended from Ismail, son of Prophet Abraham. With a subsequent increase in population, these two groups became not tribes but nations, each comprising many tribes.

In the early part of the Christian era there were migratory movements of Arabs, particularly from the Yemen. The Southern Arabs marched northwards, some to Central Arabia, others to Iraq, yet others to Syria. Some Northern Arabs also moved northwards (i.e. further north) with the result that there was a mixture of both nations in most areas even though one or the other held a pre-eminent position in a particular region. Whatever the course of migration and settlement, antagonism between the two groups continued at a high pitch, seldom relenting.

The two nations have been known by various names. Northern Arabs were called Ma'addites or Muzarites or Nizarites or Qaisites, the last named being one of the major tribes of this nation, the other important ones being the Quraish, the Bakr, the Rabee'a, the Taghlib and the Tameem. The Holy Prophet belonged to the Quraish of Mecca. The Southern Arabs were called Yamanites or Himyarites or Kalbites, the last mentioned being the leading tribe of the Southern Arabs while other important ones were the Azd, the Kinda, the Ghassan of Syria, the Lakhm of Iraq, the Khuza'a of Mecca and the Aus and Khazraj of Madina. For the sake of simplicity we will call the two nations Muzarites and Yamanites. The latter tended to have a Shi'ite outlook while the former were orthodox Sunni,<sup>2</sup> though here too there were many exceptions.

With their sub-division into tribes, sections and clans, and their dispersion over Arabia, Syria, Iraq and the Yemen, the Arabs made a confusing jigsaw puzzle with its pieces inextricably mingled. In every region existed elements of both groups, their rivalry and hostility alive and active. In Syria the dominating element in the Arab population was Kalbite, i.e. Yamanite. It was the Yamanites who had played a major role in the final subjugation of North

1. Hitti: p 280  
2. *Ibid.* P 502.

Africa and the conquest of Spain under Musa bin Nusair, who himself belonged to this faction.

With the coming of Prophet Muhammad (on whom be peace) the antagonism between the two groups diminished. His efforts resulted in the creation of a great brotherhood not only of Arabs but also of Muslims, in which racial and tribal affiliations were subordinated to the common good of Islam. But the Holy Prophet was able only to suppress the tribal antagonism, not eliminate it. It continued to simmer. Fifty years after his death it broke out again, signalled by the battle of Marj Rahit, fought near Damascus in 684, in which Marwan, known as "the Evil Thread"<sup>1</sup>, leading the Yamanites, routed the Muzarites and made himself Caliph and the founder of the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad dynasty. The battle rekindled the feud in all its fury. Marj Rahit was never forgotten, and in a manner was fought all over again in Spain a half-century later.

This was the main division of the Arabs into two nations. There were other divisions too, no less bitter and no less destructive. For instance, the year before Marj Rahit, Yazeed, the diabolical second Caliph of the house of Umayya, sent an army to attack the holy city of Madina and beat its inhabitants into submission. The citizens of Madina were slaughtered at the Battle of Harra fought near the city. Among the dead were 700 men from the noble families of the Immigrants and Ansars, including the last of the veterans of the Battle of Badr plus 10,000 others.<sup>2</sup> The beloved city of Muhammad was pillaged and destroyed while the wives and daughters of the faithful were violated by the Syrian soldiery. The Prophet's mosque was turned into a stable and the citizens led away as "slaves of Yazeed" and actually sold in the market.<sup>3</sup>

This happened in 683. The Syrians then went on to Mecca and bombarded the city with catapults throwing fire missiles. These Muslims actually burnt and destroyed the holy Kaba, the house of God. The citizens of Mecca were spared the horrible fate of their brothers in Madina only by the death of the evil Yazeed which led to the immediate return of his army to Syria.

A large number of the citizens of Madina, once the beautiful capital of Islam and now a devastated ruin, were able to escape the

1. Masudi: *Muruj*: Vol 3, p 95.  
2. Abul Fida: vol 1, p 192; Ibn Qutaiba: vol 1, p 185.  
3. Masudi: *Muruj*: Vol 3, p 79.



clutches of the Syrians and travelled to North Africa where they enrolled in the army of Musa bin Nusair. They fought in North Africa, took part in the conquest of Spain and settled down in the newly conquered territory as permanent residents. Over the years the Madinese gained a position of eminence in the Muslim population of Spain.

A third factor which was now to cause a division among the Arabs in Spain was the familiar one of old immigrants and new immigrants. The old immigrants, called *Baladi* (meaning people of the land), were the original conquerors or those who followed them to Spain soon after. They enjoyed the fruits of victory which had been won by their swords. They had acquired property and other benefits and were jealous in guarding these benefits. The new immigrants or potential new immigrants were these Syrians who had come to North Africa and threatened to cross to Spain, there to share the spoils with the conquerors without having fought for them. In fact they had been disgracefully defeated by the Berbers and driven into Ceuta.

Thus the divisions which were to fuel the civil war in Spain were: Berbers versus Arabs, Yamanites versus Muzarites, Syrians versus Madinese and old immigrants versus new immigrants. Balj, now in Ceuta, was a Qaisite (i.e. Muzarite), a Syrian and a new immigrant. Abdul Malik, in Cordoba, was a Muzarite too, but also an old immigrant and a Madinese. Forty years before he had fought and survived the Battle of Harra, at Madina, and was not about to welcome the Syrians to Spain.



The Syrians in Ceuta, at the north-western tip of the continent of Africa, looked longingly across the blue waters of the strait which separated them from Spain. They were in a terrible state. Food had run out. Beyond the protective wall which separated the promontory from the mainland of Africa swarmed countless Berbers, so to speak sharpening their knives. They had destroyed all the crops in the vicinity of Ceuta and commandeered the live-stock so that no food should fall into the hands of the Arabs even if they attempted a sally. Driven by hunger, the Syrians slaughtered their horses and ate their flesh. Then there was nothing left to eat.

Balj bin Bishr sent a message to Cordoba begging Abdul Malik bin Qatan for help. He explained the dire straits in which the Syrians found themselves, the pitiable condition of his troops who

were in a state of total hopelessness and starving to death. He asked for permission for them to cross to Spain and join their fellow Arabs, and he asked for boats to take them across. Meanwhile, could they have some provisions, please, just to keep alive?

Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb was with Balj in Ceuta. He had been separated from his own clan of Fihrites at the Battle of Tangier and swept along with the current of Syrian retreat to Ceuta. His seizure of power in Qairowan which has been described in the preceding chapter was to happen three years later. For the present he was in Ceuta in the company of a general he detested and with soldiers of whose presence in North Africa he sharply disapproved.

When Abdur Rahman came to know of the appeal for help sent by Balj to Spain, he himself slipped across the strait and met Abdul Malik in Cordoba. The Governor was his cousin. The advice which Abdur Rahman gave to his cousin that he should on no account allow the Syrians to land in the peninsula because they would take over the land, was quite unnecessary, for Abdul Malik was already of that view. Moreover, his loathing for the Syrians for the horrors perpetrated at Madina was no less than his fear of what they would do once they were safely in Spain. So his reply to Balj was in the negative. He would neither let the Syrians come to Spain nor send any vessels to Ceuta. He would not even send food.

A certain distinguished and wealthy Arab living in the south of Spain — Ziyad bin Amr of the tribe of Lakhm — did respond kindly to the Syrian appeal for help and sent across two boatloads of provisions. But when Abdul Malik came to know what the good man had done, he awarded him 700 lashes, and later, accusing him of trying to subvert the army, had the poor fellow blinded, then executed, then nailed to a cross with a dog similarly nailed on his right.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter no one dared to send food to the Syrians starving in Ceuta, whose miserable end the Governor of Spain awaited and anticipated with undisguised relish.

But circumstances were to decide otherwise. The fire of Berber revolt which had just broken out in the north-west of the country was advancing to engulf and destroy the rest of Arab Spain. A Berber division was poised to strike at Cordoba itself.



1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 20.



The Berber uprising in Spain was similar to that in North Africa and followed it as a chain reaction. The Berbers on the peninsula had heard what their fellows had done in North Africa and done so well, and wished to follow suit. The causes were the same — religious, political, social — which have already been described in the preceding chapter and need not be repeated. An additional factor which might have played a part here was the alleged unfair division of spoils between the Arabs and the Berbers. It has been said that after the conquest the Arabs occupied the best parts of Spain: the cities, the fertile valleys, the littoral plain, and left for the Berbers the poorer regions in the west and the north-west: Estremadura, Galicia. This allegation, frequently emphasised by western writers, is an exaggeration and cannot have been a major factor in the civil war in Spain.

Berbers were settled not only in the west and the north-west. They were also settled in parts of central Spain and in the southern region, in Seville, Frontera and Medina Sidonia. And if any of them found themselves living in the mountainous areas of the country it was because these areas resembled the terrain in North Africa whence they had come. The Berbers were at home in the mountains and the desert. They were not city people. However, whatever the truth of this allegation, there were causes enough to start an explosion in Spain and the explosion occurred in the north, in Galicia, from where the shock waves travelled south and east.

The Berbers rose in what the Muslims called Galicia, which was not the present Galicia but an area covering Asturias and the districts known as Leon and Astorga. The rebellion which was to turn into a short and bloody civil war spread rapidly to other areas where the Berbers were in a majority. These areas were, apart from Galicia, in the northern mountainous region west of Saragosa; in the centre — the range of Guadarrama mountains; in the west — in Merida and Coria (Caceres). The Berber region formed an arc in Spain: north - north-west - west. Saragosa remained unaffected because here the Arabs were in a majority and the Berbers were not strong enough to dispute their authority.

The Berbers chose a leader who would be their commander-in-chief. He was from the tribe of Zannata but his name has not come down to us. This happened in the year 740. The Berbers advanced towards the centre and south of Spain, slaying the Arabs in their path and driving others before them. The leader organised

the available force in three divisions. One of these advanced from the west to the district of Medina Sidonia with the object of capturing the southern coastal area and blocking the movement of the Arabs to and from North Africa. The second marched in the direction of Cordoba and concentrated north of the capital. The third, and this was the largest of the divisions, crossed the River Tagus and laid siege to Toledo. Abdul Malik bin Qatan, Governor of Spain, threw various regiments against the Berbers to stem their advance, but all were repulsed or brushed aside as the slow but relentless advance of the berbers continued.

Arab fugitives were now streaming into Cordoba. The Governor was gravely concerned for his capital which was threatened by the central division of the Berbers. He called in reinforcements from the maritime districts not directly threatened by the Berbers and hastily put together a division which was then sent off to fight and disperse the rebels north of the city. This force too was defeated and fell back on Cordoba. Now no doubt remained in the mind of the Governor that the Arabs in Spain were doomed to annihilation unless they get help from outside. The only help available was the Syrians in Ceuta. As Abdul Malik now saw it, the Syrians could not be as bad as the Berbers and were certainly the lesser of the two evils. Besides, those Syrian Arabs were fine soldiers and Balj was an able and experienced general.

Swallowing his pride, the Governor of Spain wrote to the General of the Syrians. He would let them cross to Spain provided they pledged not to remain in the country more than one year, at the end of which they would return to North Africa, and provided they give hostages as a guarantee of their good faith. The starving Syrians and their starving general readily agreed to these conditions. It was now September 741 (Zu Qad 123 Hijri). Vessels were sent across the strait and 10,000 wretched Syrians clothed in rags set foot on the soil of Spain.<sup>1</sup> Hostages were handed over to the Governor's officials and placed on the Island of Umm Hakeem, now an islet called Isla Verde in the Bay of Algeciras. They would be kept here under surveillance.

The Arabs in Spain, i.e. the *Baladies*, acted with typical Arab hospitality to welcome their brothers. The Syrians were fed, clothed and mounted and made to feel at home. Abdul Malik himself came to Algeciras to meet Balj and offer a welcome to which Balj responded with gratitude. Each was being false and neither was deceived. Abdul Malik brought a division of troops with him and at

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 31.



Algeciras the entire Arab force was organised into one army for battle. The Spanish Arabs were commanded by the sons of Abdul Malik — Umayya and Qatan, and the Syrians by Balj. This was an army of Syrians and Baladies, i.e. the new immigrants and the old; and this factor of disunity too would soon make its weight felt.

In a few days the Syrians were rearing to go, eager to get their hands at the throats of these Berbers, cousins of those other Berbers who had thrashed them in North Africa and made their life miserable in Ceuta. Balj was once again in his element — an aggressive general, a brave warrior, a proud aristocrat scorning his enemies. He was not in full command of the force but played a leading role in the series of actions which followed and which ended in a crushing defeat of the Berber division in Wadi-ul-Fatah (Valley of Victory) near Medina Sidonia. The Syrians took their share of the spoils and found themselves in possession of a large amount of booty in the form of weapons, horses, slaves, and goods. This restored their pride; and as their pride grew their enthusiasm for honouring their pledge to leave Spain weakened.

The next battle took place a little north of Cordoba where the second Berber division was concentrated. Here also the rebels were roundly defeated. Following this victory the Arabs marched north to Toledo where Arab forces were under siege by the third Berber division. The insurgents hastily lifted the siege to face the oncoming Arabs and a hard battle was fought in the Valley of Saleet (Guadacalete), a small stream falling into the Tagus from the south a few miles west of Toledo. Here the Berbers suffered their third and most devastating defeat in which thousands of them perished while the rest fled northwards and westwards, pursued part of the way by fast columns of Arab cavalry.

The Berber insurrection in Spain was over. They would rise again to oppose the Arabs but at a different time and in the context of a different war, not in this civil war. This had been won by the Arabs and the lustre of glory fell largely on the Syrians who had borne the brunt of the fighting. Once a bedraggled and pitiable horde begging for food and shelter, they were now a victorious corps, well-armed, well-mounted, well-fed, their hands full of spoils bravely won from an equally brave enemy.

The Arabs came back to Cordoba. It was now about July 742 (Ramzan 124 Hijri). Nearly a year had passed since Balj landed in Spain. The Berber rebels had been crushed and Abdul Malik

thought it was time for the Syrians to go.

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The Governor of Spain spoke to the General of the Syrians. He said that it was time for him and his soldiers to leave the country and go back to where they had come from. Balj asked that they be sent to the coast of Elvira (the future Granada) or to Tudmir (Murcia) from where they could sail for North Africa. At this time Qairowan and Tunis were safe for Arabs, thanks to the victories of Hanzala bin Safwan, but Tangier and the surrounding districts were still in Berber hands. It was not safe for Arabs to go there except as a powerful military force. Abdul Malik knew that only too well and wanted the Syrians to go back exactly the way they had come.

"We have no boats except in Algeciras," he said to the Syrian general. On this Balj exploded: "You want to throw us to the Berbers so they will kill us in their land!"<sup>1</sup>

The conference broke up. The Syrians heard of this disagreement and were incensed by the proposal of the Governor which would lead to their annihilation at the hands of the Berbers. Waiting for a moment when there were not many guards around, they grabbed Abdul Malik and expelled him from the palace, escorting him unceremoniously to his house in Cordoba. This was an unusual way for a governor of Spain to be removed from office and dumped outside. Abdul Malik needed help, but at this moment of need the Yamanite faction of Spanish Arabs forsook him. Abdul Malik was a Muzarite. Balj was a muzarite too, but luckily for him, a victorious and powerful one.

Balj now rode in triumph to the palace where he was elected by the Syrian soldiery as Governor of Spain. Meanwhile news arrived at Cordoba of the ill-treatment at their place of confinement of the hostages given by the Syrians when they landed at the coast of Spain. One of them had died of thirst. At this a clamour went up for the blood of Abdul Malik. The next moment, either on the orders of Balj or by his acquiescence, the Syrians stormed into the house of Abdul Malik and dragged him out. As the poor man protested, they screamed at him: "You escaped our swords at the battle of Harra and wanted your revenge by making us eat our animals and their skins. Then you wanted to throw us to our death!"<sup>2</sup>

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 31.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 31.



Abdul Malik was an old man, hoary with age, reputed to be past ninety and looking like an ostrich<sup>1</sup>, but his venerable appearance earned him no mercy from the frenzied crowd of Syrians. They killed him on the plain outside Cordoba and impaled him on a cross on the river bank near the great bridge over the Guadalquivir. On his right they crucified a pig, on his left a dog.<sup>2</sup> The body remained rotting on the cross for several days until one night when it was secretly removed by the slaves of the ill-starred governor and spirited away.

This place came to be known as *Maslab* (the place of crucifixion) of *Abdul Malik*. Some years later Abdul Malik's son got permission from the then governor of Spain, Yusuf bin Abdur Rahman, who was himself a nephew of Abdul Malik, to build a mosque at the place where the old man was nailed to the cross, but this mosque was destroyed in the early part of the 9th Century during some disturbances.<sup>3</sup> The place was then lost to memory and to history.

Balj bin Bishr was now Governor of Spain, but he had only a few weeks left to him.<sup>4</sup>



The Arabs of Spain, i.e. the Baladies, were horrified at what had been done to the aged governor by a people whom they had permitted to enter their land when they were dying of hunger. This was done by Arab to Arab. Never had Arab fought Arab in Spain since they landed in the peninsula thirty years before. It was bad enough to have the Berbers rise against the Arabs, but for Arabs to fight each other in a civil war was horrible, in fact unforgivable. There was a feeling of outrage.

This was exploited by Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, who had been present with the Syrians in the siege of Ceuta. Abdur Rahman was a cousin of Abdul Malik and now received the support of the slain governor's two sons, Umayya and Qatan, who had fled Cordoba when their father was driven from the palace. They had taken refuge in Saragosa, capital of the frontier, which was spared the ravages of the civil war and was still in Arab hands. All

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 21.

2. *Ibid*: vol 3, p 19.

3. Akhbar Majmua: p 42.

4. There is mention in some accounts of several engagements fought between Balj and Abdul Malik, but most reliable sources have narrated the events only as given here without mentioning such engagements.

assembled here to organise an opposition to the Syrians and to muster forces to operate against them. The moving force behind the opposition to Balj were the Fihrites, the clan of the illustrious Uqba bin Nafe, conqueror of the Maghreb, to which Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb and Abdul Malik bin Qatan belonged.

At Saragosa the Baladies were joined by a strong contingent under the Arab commanding general of Narbonne, Abdur Rahman bin Alqama, who in his time was popularly known as "the knight of Spain". They were also joined, strangely enough, by the Berbers who survived the recent action at Toledo and who now made common cause with Spanish Arabs in seeking vengeance from the Syrians. The Berbers nourished the hope that after disposing of their Syrian enemies they would be in a better position to dispose of all Arabs who remained in Spain. This strange coalition of forces, an army numbering 40,000 men, advanced towards Cordoba.<sup>1</sup>

Balj came out to meet the advancing host. He had 12,000 soldiers, mainly Syrians, but also some Baladies who had thrown in their lot with the man they believed to be a rising star. The two armies met at Aqua Portora, in the district of Walba a few miles north of Cordoba. Here a most sanguinary battle was fought in Shawwal 124 Hijri (August 742).

The Baladies and the Berbers put up what can only be described as a disgraceful show, perhaps because they were a motley lot without the unifying influence of a single motive and a single commander. The Syrians on the other hand were a well-knit, well-led team under a capable and clear-headed general. The only notable performance on the part of the Baladies was put up by Abdur Rahman bin Alqama, commanding general of Narbonne and Knight of Spain. He charged at the head of his Narbonne cavalry, broke through the Syrian front and got to Balj, who was mounted on a white horse. He struck at Balj, mortally wounding him and knocking him off his horse. In spite of this victory in single combat, however, the Baladies were routed by the Syrians and driven in disorder from the battlefield. They lost 10,000 men as against 1,000 Syrians killed in battle.<sup>2</sup>

This was the bloodiest battle of the civil war so far in Spain. It showed how the quality of leadership and the courage and skill of the soldier can compensate for lack of numbers. It was a feather in

1. Some accounts have exaggerated the strength of this army to the impossible figure of 100,000, including 40,000 from Narbonne.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 32; Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 16.



the cap of Balj and his brave Syrian Arabs. But if in a military sense they deserved their accolades, from the point of view of Muslim history they deserved the opposite. The civil war in Spain suddenly changed in character from a Berber versus Arab to an Arab versus Arab conflict which would continue for more than a generation, cause untold misery to the Muslims and seriously weaken the Muslim cause in Spain in the face of the rising Christian threat from the north. This was the first time that Arab had crossed swords with Arab in Spain, thanks to the Syrians, thanks especially to the valiant but unscrupulous Balj and the disgraceful treatment meted out to the venerable Abdul Malik bin Qatan.

But Balj himself had come to the end of his military career. A few days after this battle he died of his wounds. It had been a month since he killed and crucified Abdul Malik and eleven months since he landed in Spain. Upon his death the Syrians elected a new general, namely Sa'laba bin Salama, who had been appointed second in succession by the Caliph when he sent the army under Kulsum to North Africa to fight the Berbers. After the death of Kulsum at Tangier this Sa'laba had been next in succession, according to the old order, and now he and his Syrian followers felt that he was the rightful commander in Spain. This was another blow to Muslim unity in Spain, for compared with this man Balj had been an angel.

Sa'laba became Governor of Spain in August 742 (Shawwal 124 Hijri) and mercifully did not remain so for long. He showed his vicious character and villainous temperament a few months later when an armed opposition raised its head again, this time in Merida in the west, this time the local Berbers and Baladies combining to check the power of the Syrians.

Sa'laba marched against them and fought a long drawn out battle at Merida. At the start the battle went against the Syrians but Sa'laba turned the tables on his foe with a bold surprise attack. A large number of Berbers and Spanish Arabs were killed and 1,000 taken prisoner along with their wives and children. These captives were led to Cordoba where their number swelled to more than 10,000 with the addition of helpless Arabs rounded up in the capital because of their anti-Syrian sentiment. The captives and the Syrian Army camped outside the city while Sa'laba prepared a horrible spectacle for the following day, which was a Friday.

A vast multitude gathered to witness what would be a mock auction to be followed by a mass execution. It was after the

congregational prayer. The captives would be sold not to the highest bidder but to the lowest. Among those to be auctioned as slaves were two old and venerable Madinese. When an onlooker bid 10 dinars for each of them, the auctioneer called: "Who bids lower?" This farce went on to the merriment of the Syrians until one of the venerable citizens was sold for a goat and the other for a dog. Other nobles from the best families of Mecca and Madina were sold in like manner to the lowest bidder.<sup>1</sup> Thus was indignity and abuse heaped upon the descendants of those who as companions of the Holy Prophet had established Islam in the World.

Then it was time for the execution, not just of the remaining unsold captives, but of all captives. Before it could begin, however, a regiment of 1000 horse came riding into the camp led by Abul Khattar, the new Governor of Spain, flying the banner of the Caliph. This happened on a Friday, in May 743 (Rajab 125 Hijri).



Some time before this event a few of the notable inhabitants of Cordoba had written to the Viceroy of North Africa about the state of affairs in Spain. They were the sensible and moderate citizens, not affiliated to one faction or the other, who feared that the assumption of power by a man like Sa'laba would only aggravate an already perilous situation to the detriment of the Muslims. They asked the Viceroy to appoint a good man as governor of Spain with the authority of the Caliph behind him.

The viceroy at this time was Hanzala bin Safwan. He checked the matter with Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik and on the Caliph's direction appointed a good man as governor of Spain. This was his cousin and a respected noble of Damascus, known for his courage and uprightness of character, a Yamanite from the tribe of Kalb by the name of Hussam bin Zirar. He was commonly addressed as Abul Khattar.

The governor took with him a force of 1000 horsemen and sailed from Tunis. Landing on the south-eastern coast of the peninsula, he rode to Cordoba without the slightest knowledge that his arrival would coincide with the horrible entertainment organised by Sa'laba. It was just the good fortune of the 10,000 hapless victims of Sa'laba that Abul Khattar arrived when he did

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 34; Akhbar Majmua: p 25.



and informed the populace who he was and what he was. The authority of the Caliph was still respected in Spain. Sa'laba and the Syrians, as well as others present, offered a respectful welcome to the new governor, whose first act was to liberate the captives.

Abul Khattar healed the wounds inflicted upon the Muslims in Spain by the civil war. He created unity and harmony out of discord and hostility. All factions, all tribes accepted him and agreed to follow him. He was good to all. He declared an amnesty for the Fihrites, the clan of the late Abdul Malik bin Qatan, which had been the moving spirit behind the recent attack against Cordoba and the main pillar of opposition to the Syrians. Spain smiled again, hesitantly, which was just as well, for its joy was to be shortlived.

The Governor's big problem was now the Syrians. They were there as an unpopular and unwanted but powerful and much feared elite force from many districts of Syria, called *junds*, or divisions, meaning districts of soldier-settlers ready for war as required by the government. There was even a detachment of Egyptian troops in the Syrian corps. If left unemployed and unrewarded, they would turn into bands of rapacious soldiery preying on helpless citizens, or they would form political factions making and breaking governments. Their presence in the camp near Cordoba as potential trouble-makers was having a disquieting effect on the new governor. They would have to be split up, their unity broken, and settled in a reasonably contented state.

With this in mind, Abul Khattar arranged to disperse them over various districts and settle them on public lands in fee. They would take from local cultivators a third of the crops which would otherwise go to the state. The *junds* or divisions were settled as follows:

Division of Damascus:	Elvira (later Granada).
Division of Jordan:	Rejio (Archidona and Malaga).
Division of Palestine:	Medina Sidonia (Jerez).
Division of Emessa:	Seville
Division of Qinasareen:	Jaen.
Division of Egypt:	Partly Beja but mainly Tudmir (Murcia). <sup>1</sup>

Abul Khattar seems to have paid particular attention to Tudmir (Orihuela, later Murcia) where the old warlord, Count Theodimir, had ruled as a virtually independent prince since the first Muslim conquest 30 years before.<sup>1</sup> The Count had even travelled to Damascus to pay his respects to the Caliph and receive confirmation of his special position in the Islamic State of Spain. He now gave his only daughter in marriage to Abul Khattar, and as part of the dowry the Arab chief inherited such vast properties that his descendants would be famous in the region for their wealth and hospitality. This also ended the special privileges enjoyed by the Christians of Orihuela, for with the death of Theodimir most of his property came to his daughter and to Abul Khattar. The Count's successor, Atanogildo, a Gothic nobleman but no relative of Theodimir, was a mere figurehead, a shadow of his illustrious predecessor.<sup>2</sup>

When clearing the Syrians out of Cordoba the new governor also cleared the old governor out of Spain. He told Sa'laba and some of his cronies that he regarded them as the chief cause of friction and that they were no longer welcome in Spain. They were exiled and sent with an escort to North Africa, from where Sa'laba made his way to Damascus. Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, though not exiled, was given the cold shoulder. He had been waiting for an opportunity to oust the Syrians and take over Spain, to whose government he had aspired for a long time, but with the coming of Abul Khattar with the authority of the Caliph, he knew that his last chance had vanished. Consequently, he left Spain and sailed to Tunis. His seizure of power at Qairowan from Hanzala has been narrated in the preceding chapter.



For some time all went well. Then Abul Khattar's natural parochialism got the better of him and he began to lean towards the Yamanites, who in any case were the major element in the Arab population in Spain. His partiality towards this faction became more open, as did his hostility to the Muzarites, many of whom were dismissed from important offices. His antipathy towards the Muzarites was perhaps understandable because many years before

1. Details of the battle between Theodimir and Abdul Azeez bin Musa have been described in this writer's "The Muslim Conquest of Spain."

2. Vilar: vol 1, pp 44 - 47.

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Izari: vol 3, p 33; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 259; Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 20. Ameer Ali (p 116) speaks of an earlier settlement showing also Persians in Jerez and Yemenis (people of the Yemen, not the faction of Yamanites) in Toledo. This is possible, though he does not give his sources.



he had been persecuted and tortured by the Muzarite Viceroy of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The rough treatment meted out to the Muzarites brought Abul Khattar into conflict with one of their most eminent chiefs, one who was destined to play a dominant and often harmful role in the affairs of Spain over the next twelve years. This was Sumail bin Hatim.

Sumail was the grandson of Shamir bin Zil Jaushan, the man who killed the Prophet's grandson Hussain at Karbala and carried his head to Damascus to lay at the feet of Yazeed.<sup>2</sup> Sumail had inherited some of the evil of his grandfather. He had come from Syria as an officer of the army sent by the Caliph to deal with the Berbers, and after its defeat at Tangier had crossed with Balj to Spain. He was one of the principal chiefs of the Qaisites; he was commander of the division of Qinassareen, and after Balj, the most important Muzarite in the country. He was an illiterate man, unable to read or write but possessed a fertile brain and was a consummate intriguer. He was a poet. He was also very popular among his followers because of his liberality in rewarding them and a special knack he had of handling people. He was heavily addicted to wine and frequently drunk, but nevertheless a man of unusual vitality and determination.

Sumail fell out with Abul Khattar over a matter in which the Governor gave an unjust verdict in favour of Yamanites against Muzarites. He remonstrated with the Governor but was unceremoniously thrown out of the palace by the Governor's guard.

Sumail at once set to work to overthrow Abul Khattar. Since the Muzarites were a minority in the country, he made a bid to win the support of the Yamanite tribes of Lakhm and Juzam. The Juzam chief Suwaba bin Salama who commanded the division of Palestine, also bore a grudge against Abul Khattar because the latter had dismissed him from the post of Commanding General of Seville. Sumail won him over by offering to install him as Governor of Spain once Abul Khattar was eliminated.

The plotters mustered their forces and concentrated at Medina Sidonia. When Abul Khattar heard of this he set out from Cordoba to deal with the threat but underestimated the strength of the rebels and consequently did not take a large enough force with him. At a battle fought on the bank of the Guadalete (Wadi

Lakka)<sup>1</sup>, 20 miles north of Medina Sidonia, Abul Khattar was defeated and taken prisoner. A few days later, with Sumail at his side and Abul Khattar following in chains, Suwaba entered Cordoba, where the victorious soldiers — Muzarites and Yamanites — elected him as governor. This happened in Rajab 127 Hijri (May 745), two years after Abul Khattar had ridden into Cordoba as the newly appointed governor. Henceforth Suwaba would be Governor of Spain, but only a nominal one. The real power lay in the hands of Sumail whose machinations had successfully brought about the end he desired.

Abul Khattar was able to break out of prison with the help of his partisans and made his way to Beja in the west of the country, where he gathered his forces for waging war against his enemies. He was joined by a large section of the Yamanite population, and when he felt strong enough to tackle Sumail and Suwaba, he advanced to Cordoba. It was now the end of 128 Hijri (autumn of 746).

The Syrians and their Yamanite supporters came out of the city to meet Abul Khattar. The stage was set for what promised to be a great battle. However, before hostilities could begin, Sumail sent an agent to Abul Khattar's camp to subvert the Yamanites, and so efficiently did this man do his work that the entire body of Abul Khattar's army decided against fighting a battle against a force which contained a large number of their fellows. They abandoned the battlefield, carrying their protesting commander with them. Again Abul Khattar put as much distance as possible between himself and Cordoba.

Soon after this episode, at the very beginning of Muharram 129 Hijri (November 746) Suwaba died of natural causes and Spain was left without a governor. The factions quarrelled. The Yamanites wanted Abul Khattar back as governor. The Muzarites wanted Sumail. For nearly four months the country lurched along without a governor on the brink of bloodshed. Then, by an ingenious method which was accepted by all concerned, the people chose as their new governor Yusuf the Fihrite, son of Abdul Rahman bin Habeab and cousin of the Viceroy of Africa. They made Yusuf governor for one year; he ruled for ten!

1. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 50.

2. In Pakistan this name is frequently pronounced as Shimr.

1. Some writers have erroneously given the location of this battle as Shaqunda, confusing it with a later action fought at this place.



## 7: THE LAST OF THE WALIS

After the death of Suwaba bin Salama at the beginning of Muharram 129 Hijri (mid-September 746) there was a power vacuum. Factions intent on grabbing power jockeyed for position. The main factions were the Muzarites and the Yamanites, but there were also sub-factions hoping to see their chiefs elevated to positions of authority and influence. As a stop gap arrangement, the people chose Abdur Rahman bin Kusair as their governor, to see to the administration of the country until a more permanent arrangement could be made.

It was now the beginning of the end of the Umayyad Caliphate in the east. The Abbasid power was clearly rising. Damascus was therefore not in a position to pay attention to events in the western territories. Spain was like a ship adrift, and this was a matter of grave concern for all thoughtful Muslims not blinded by factional hatred. But there remained a lack of trust and deep differences in Muslim society, based on racial and historical grounds, which kept the feuds alive and the people apart. There was a sense of urgency, even alarm, as the country stumbled towards anarchy. Thus nearly four months passed.

Then various groups assembled for a convention at Cordoba. The personalities who decided weighty matters of state were the chiefs and the leaders of clans, the prominent citizens, the generals and state officials. At the convention it was agreed that power should be shared by the two main factions, viz Muzarites and Yamanites, in the way that leaders chosen from the factions would alternate as governors — a Muzarite for one year, then a Yamanite for one year, then a Muzarite again, and so on. It was a very sensible and very fair solution, even if it ignored the Berbers who were the largest single Muslim group in Spain. It was agreed that the first governor would be a Muzarite.

The Muzarites turned to Sumail, who was undoubtedly the most distinguished, the most powerful and most capable of the Muzarite chiefs in the country. They wanted him as their governor, but Sumail was reluctant to accept the post. He knew that the Muzarites were in a minority and would always be under pressure. He feared that there would be problems; and if trouble did erupt he would prefer to tackle it with behind-the-scenes manoeuvres rather than as the main actor on the stage. A figurehead could sit in the

governor's chair, while he, the real power, pulled the strings. He had already chosen the figurehead — Yusuf the Fihrite — and his proposal that the Muzarites elect Yusuf as governor was readily accepted.

The man elected was Yusuf bin Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb bin Abi Ubaida bin Uqba bin Nafe. He was the great-great-grandson of the illustrious Uqba bin Nafe, conqueror of the Maghreb and founder of Qairowan. In fact, Yusuf was born in Qairowan fifty seven years before, and had come to Spain as a young man soon after the conquest. His family commanded respect and affection on both sides of the strait of Gibraltar. The Bani Fihri were a clan of the Quraish of Mecca, the first Muslims, and their descendants were highly regarded by all. This Yusuf was a gentle and mild-mannered man with goodwill for all and malice for none. Moreover, he was not in the least tainted by the stigma of factionalism which was attached to so many others. In terms of ability and personality, he was a medicore and colourless man, which suited Sumail and those who would wish to manipulate him.

Yusuf lived in peaceful seclusion in Elvira. The leaders of the Muzarites wrote to him and informed him of their choice and asked him to come and occupy the governor's chair at once. To their surprise, he declined the invitation. This was a setback to Sumail's plan but he was determined to get his man. So the leaders of the faction wrote once again to Yusuf, this time warning him of the possibility of discord and civil war, and that if civil war did break out he would be to blame.<sup>1</sup> Yusuf was not going to carry that burden. He accepted the call. He would be the last of the *Walis* of Spain. The word *Wali* was used in the early days of Islam for a dependent governor or administrator. The other commonly used word, *Ameer*, denoted a high military commander or independent or quasi-independent ruler. The next ruler of Spain, after Yusuf would be an *Ameer*. Yusuf was a *Wali* and the last of the *Walis*.

He became Governor in January 747 (Rabi-ul-Akhir 129 Hijri) on the understanding that he would be governor for one year. In due course the appointment was confirmed by the Viceroy of Africa,<sup>2</sup> which is not surprising because the Viceroy was the

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 140.

2. Ibn Izari : vol 1, p 62.



Governor's cousin.<sup>1</sup> As part of the arrangement of government, the people appointed Yahya bin Hurais of the Bani Juzam (Yamanites) as administrator of Rejio in the south (districts of Archidona and Malaga). This appointment was a pre-condition to the appointment of Yusuf as governor of Spain. This Yahya was a Syrian-hater of the most rabid kind and was known to have said: "If the blood of the people of Syria were lawful, I would drink it by the cupful."<sup>2</sup> Sumail the Syrian was not going to forget that.



There was peace in the land. Yusuf devoted himself to the administration of the provinces and the country prospered. But Yusuf was a titular head only. The power behind the throne was Sumail — warrior, politician, intriguer. In almost all actions of state he would tell Yusuf what to do and Yusuf would do as he was told. It irked him to play second fiddle but he accepted the position, for the time being at least.

When a year was about to be up, in early 130 Hijri (late 747) the Yamanites began preparing to take over the government of Spain which for the following year would be ruled by their man. They were all set for a transfer of power. But Sumail had no intention of letting the Yamanites take control and Yusuf timidly bowed to his stronger partner's opinion. The Yamanities then decided that the only way to effect a transfer of power was by the use of force; their opponents had left them no alternative. In this matter Abul Khattar instigated the Yamanites to fight for their rights and goaded them into action. A very large number of them looked upon Abul Khattar as the constitutional governor, unconstitutionally deposed, who had a right to resume office.

But now Abul Khattar, who had been living in Beja in the south-west of Spain, had a rival candidate in Yahya bin Hurais, who had been appointed administrator of Rejio at the same time as Yusuf, because soon after things had settled down in the new system of alternating government, they had unceremoniously dismissed Yahya from his post. He claimed a right to the governor's chair on the grounds that the clan of Juzam was a powerful clan of

the Yamanites and bigger than Abul Khattar's clan. There was little love lost between the two Yamanite contenders, but for the sake of unity Abul Khattar accepted Yahya as the Yamanite candidate and future governor. Their combined forces marched to the capital and, on the south bank of the Guadalquivir, opposite Cordoba, by the suburb of Secunda (Shaqunda), they went into camp.

Following the arrival of the Yamanites, the Muzarites came out of the city under their chiefs, Yusuf and Sumail, the latter being the real army commander.<sup>1</sup> They crossed the river and camped some distance from the Yamanites, it being understood that the battle would begin in the morning and would decide the issue of the government of Spain. The two forces were not very large but they were composed of brave men, knights and noble warriors, most of them mounted and well-armed. The Yamanites had a slight advantage in numbers.<sup>2</sup> The opposing forces were large enough for a lively battle and brave enough for a bloody one.

It proved both lively and bloody, and more. It turned out to be an unusual battle — vicious, cruel, merciless. It started after the prayer of the dawn during which both sides prayed to the same Allah and invoked His blessings on the same prophet. Then they went for each other. The first phase was a contest of cavalry, mounted knights now duelling in single combat, now charging and counter charging in massed squadrons. They were brave men — these cavaliers who slew and were slain in a cause which had more to do with tribalism than with right or justice.

They slaughtered each other on the plain of Secunda without respite and without mercy in a battle which reminded the older Muslims of the Battle of Siffin fought on the bank of the River Euphrates in 657 between Caliph Ali and the Syrian rebels led by Muawia. That too was a Muslim vs Muslim battle and resulted in terrible carnage, as this one was doing. There was no let-up in the intensity of fighting as the sun rose in the sky and the day got hotter. One heard nothing but the neighing of horses and the clash of arms: one saw nothing but dead.<sup>3</sup>

1. It is said that Yusuf was reluctant to shed the blood of fellow Muslims and retired from the palace to his house in Cordoba (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 36; Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 140). Others confirm his presence with the army at Secunda (Akhbar Majmua: pp 59-60).
2. Akhbar Majmua: p 59.
3. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 36.

1 *Ibid*: vol 2, p 46. Some say that the Viceroy was the governor's father, but this is unlikely. Both were old men, close in years, which would exclude a filial relationship.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 37.



By mid-morning, or soon after, all the lances were broken and almost all the horses were killed or disabled. The cavaliers found that they had become foot soldiers because the horses which kept their feet off the ground were no longer there. Discarding their broken lances, they drew their swords and continued to fight with a courage and steadfastness which did honour to both armies. The ranks of the warriors thinned, heaps of dead rose on the field, but neither side would relent. Then the swords were broken. Yet, the men remained on the battlefield without weapons but continuing the pitiless struggle. Historians were to say that there had not been a battle in Spain greater than this in loss of life.<sup>1</sup>

It was now past midday. What followed was an orgy of horror in which men fought with their bare hands. They tore each other's hair, buffeted each other with their fists, kicked each other, even bit each other. Some hit their opponents with bows and empty quivers.<sup>2</sup> It was a madness which had seized the belligerents locked in hand-to-hand combat from which neither side wished to, or was able to, disengage. In blind fury, they gouged out each other's eyes, strangled each other and tore at each other's faces.

But this too ended. it could not go on. Their limbs refused to move, their bodies unable to obey their wills. From sheer fatigue the men stopped fighting and drew apart, but still glared at each other with hate filled eyes. They were too exhausted to fight on, their strength drained from their bodies. No warrior from either side could take a step towards his adversary. They let their guard down to rest and wait for the madness to get out of their system.

It was now that Sumail launched his master stroke. He sent for the people of the bazaar of Cordoba to come and fight. The Muzarites and their sympathisers in the bazar — tradesmen, blacksmiths, shopkeepers — responded to the call with alacrity and rushed to Secunda, 400 strong, armed with knives and cudgels. Very few of them had weapons like swords or spears.<sup>3</sup> They fell upon the Yamanites of whom many were killed and the rest captured. Shortly before sunset, the battle was over, won in its last phase by the tradesmen of the bazaar of Cordoba. Abul Khattar and Yahya bin Hurais were able to evade capture but almost all the rest were overpowered and taken prisoner.

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer : vol 5, p 140.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 36; Maqqari: vol 3, p 23.

3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 26.

The captives were brought to the Church of St Vincent which was later to become the Grand Mosque of Cordoba. Here Sumail presided with hideous satisfaction over what was to be a mass execution, feeling perhaps as his grandfather Shamir might have felt when beheading Imam Hussain at Karbala. First, it appears, 70 of the captives were whipped.<sup>1</sup> Some accounts say that many captives were executed but others spared when the eminent citizens of Cordoba personally intervened and threatened action against Sumail unless the gory spectacle was stopped.<sup>2</sup> Others relate that all were executed.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the number of those killed in cold blood in this orgy of vengeance, it was undoubtedly a revolting scene of senseless slaughter of soldiers who had fought bravely and honourably and had a right to their lives. But Sumail had to do things his own way!

Then they set out to find the leaders of the Yamanites — Abul Khattar and Yahya bin Hurais — both of whom were hiding in a mill not far from Cordoba. Abul Khattar was found and seized. Before they could take him away, however, he pointed out the hiding place of Yahya, the Syrian-hater who would drink the blood of the Syrians by the cup. When he was dragged out of his hiding place, Abul Khattar could not resist a last crack at his rival: "O son of the dark one, is anything left in your cup which you have not drunk?"<sup>4</sup>

Both the chiefs were led to Sumail and at once beheaded.



There was peace in Spain after the Battle of Secunda — a battle which was a feather in the cap of Sumail. His stock rose among the people. He became even more distinguished as a man of strength and valour, a man of iron, and this had the effect of discouraging others from following the example of Abul Khattar and Yahya bin Hurais. However, he also became more dictatorial and Yusuf was pushed even more into the background. He accepted a backseat position, lacking the will to dispute Sumail's authority and domination.

With the image of Sumail looming larger than ever behind him, the Governor devoted himself whole-heartedly to the

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 60.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ibn Izari : vol 2, p 37.

4. *Ibid.*



government of the country and the well-being of the people. He organised Spain into four provinces, each with a governor or lieutenant-governor. These provinces were: Andalus in the south, corresponding to the Roman Baetica, with its capital at Cordoba; Merida in the west, corresponding to the Roman Lusitania, with its capital at Merida; Toledo in the centre and east centre, with its capital at Toledo; and the Upper Frontier, covering the north-east of the peninsula, with its capital at Saragosa. A fifth province, outside Spain but part of the Muslim state, was Narbonne, stretching north and north-east from the eastern part of the Pyrenees Mountains. Map 3 in the following chapter shows the approximate boundaries of the four provinces of Spain then under Muslim control.

But peace was not to last. The Yamanites were not willing to forgive Yusuf and Sumail, particularly Sumail, for their bloody defeat at Secunda or the cruel slaughter of the captives at the Church of St Vincent. Resentment simmered in their breasts, waiting for a leader, any leader, to tap. The hard-heartedness and rigidity of Sumail and the passion with which he pressed the persecution of his enemies, left no room for compromise. Another factor which led to instability was that the Caliphate of the House of Umayya was beginning to crumble in the east under the attacks of the Abbasids, and the home government was too preoccupied with its struggle for survival to pay any attention to Islam's farthest western province. The fate of Spain now lay entirely in the hands of the Muslims of Spain.

There were three uprisings during the next two years. The details of these events have not been specified in history but they probably all took place in the year 131 Hijri (748 - 749). The first and potentially the most dangerous was the revolt of Abdur Rahman bin Alqama, the knight of Spain and Governor of Narbonne, who had mortally wounded Balj in battle. He announced his opposition to the Government at Cordoba, which he regarded as illegal because it should have changed at the expiry of one year from the appointment of Yusuf as governor. He began preparations to cross the Pyrenees with the aim of putting an end to the government, but before he could move he was treacherously killed by some of his own men who sent his head as a prize to Cordoba.

The second was a relatively minor event. A chief named Amr bin Yazeed al Azraq rose in Seville to challenge the government.

Yusuf sent a detachment to Seville which put an end to the rebellion after killing a large number of rebels, including their chief.

The third was a more serious threat and started at Beja under a general named Urwa bin Waleed, who was now given the additional name of Al Zimmi. Among those who followed him were a large number of Christians, and since non-Muslims living in a Muslim state were called Zimmis, the appellation came to be applied to Urwa as well. In his forces was included a contingent of Berbers.

Yusuf sent a detachment to Beja which was defeated by Urwa. After that the rebel marched to Seville and captured the city without difficulty. These two victories strengthened his position and turned him into a more formidable threat to Cordoba. Now Yusuf marched in person with a larger force to confront Urwa at Seville, and in the battle that followed the Zimmi's army was defeated with heavy slaughter and the rebel chief captured and executed.

Time passed. It was now 132 Hijri (749 - 750) Yusuf felt more sure of himself, but so did Sumail who became even harder to deal with. He took all decisions and issued all orders, and wasted no opportunity to oppress the Yamanites. He would decide who should be allowed to see the Governor and who was to be kept away from him, as a result of which Yusuf found himself more and more isolated. Sumail's domination irked him; Sumail's presence made him the target of hostility which was actually directed at the Syrian general. Moreover, he had begun to fear the power of Sumail, knowing that the Syrian could at any time depose him and proclaim himself as governor of the country, after which he would probably shown him no more mercy than he had shown others.

Yusuf could think of no better solution to his problems than by separating himself from Sumail and putting as much distance as possible between Sumail and Cordoba. Consequently, Yusuf appointed him Governor of the Upper Frontier, and in pursuance of this decision Sumail travelled to Saragosa with two hundred soldiers to take up his new appointment. Yusuf felt better. There was peace in Cordoba and in Spain, but the peace of the next few years was a peace of the hungry and the dead.



The famine struck in 131 Hijri (748 - 749) and lasted for five years.<sup>1</sup> There was drought in the land. The price of food soared in the markets. Famine spread over hill and valley, town and village, leading to hunger, pestilence and death. The entire population of Spain suffered hardship — Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Berbers, Muzarites and Yamanites. The superstitious saw in this calamity the hand of Allah, the wrath of God manifesting against the Muslims for their sins because brother had been fighting brother and factions heaping cruelties upon one another. The people had earned a just retribution.

The hardest hit was the north-western part of Spain: Galicia and areas bordering it to south and east, populated mainly by Berbers who suffered grievously as a result. They left the region in their thousands, abandoning their property in Galicia, Astorga and the north bank of the River Duero, and migrated southwards. In this movement they were harassed by the Christians who took advantage of Muslim sufferings to recover lands conquered and occupied by the Muslims forty years before. Of this more will be said in the next chapter. A large number of Berbers travelled southwards, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and returned to the Maghreb to rejoin the clans which inhabited their native lands. The spectre of hunger stalked the peninsula.

In this critical situation Yusuf did excellent work as governor. He was kind and sympathetic and took energetic measure to alleviate the sufferings of the people. He harnessed all the resources of the country to supply food to the hungry, to provide shelter to the homeless and to bring solace to the bereaved. He made no distinction between the Muslims and the Christians.

At the end of the fifth year, in 136 Hijri (753 - 754), the worst was over. The drought ended. Rain fell. It would be a long time before all the damage was repaired and the wounds caused by the famine were healed, but the land began to smile again. And again it was time for the civil war.



The most serious threat to the central authority of Cordoba appeared in the north in late 136 Hijri (early 754). Hubab bin Rawaha al Zahri, assisted by Tameem bin Ma'bad al Fihri,

1. According to some accounts it started in 133 Hijri and lasted two years.

mustered the anti-Muzarite elements in the north - east, including the Berbers, and advanced on Saragosa where Sumail had now ruled for four years. He came out to face the enemy but was beaten and had to scurry back for shelter in his fortified provincial capital. The rebels advanced and laid siege to the city.

Soon after this the rebels were joined by a noble-born Arab named Amir bin Amr al Abdari. This Amir, originally from Cordoba, had earlier begun preparations in Algeciras to fight Yusuf's government. Sumail had advised Yusuf to have him assassinated, but word of the intended attempt leaked out and Amir departed with his Yamanite followers for the north. Some time at the beginning of 137 Hijri (mid 754) his forces joined those already besieging Saragosa. Apparently Amir was a much more important person than Hubab and was accepted as leader and commander of the entire Yamanite and Berber force in the Frontier Province. He declared openly for the Abbasids, who now ruled in the East, and called upon the people to swear loyalty to them. He wrote to the new Abbasid Caliph at Baghdad (the Umayyad Caliphate had fallen four years before in 132 Hijri) and claimed that he had been appointed Governor of Spain by no other than the ruling Caliph Al Mansur.

Sumail was hard pressed in Saragosa. A lack of numbers prevented him from striking out and breaking the siege. So he appealed to Yusuf for help, emphasising the urgency of the matter and not for a moment doubting that the man whom he had put in the Governor's place and supported through the vicissitudes of seven years' rule would come to his aid. In this he was wrong. The impending doom facing Sumail was like music to Yusuf's ears; it was just what he wanted. Yusuf actually hoped that Sumail would be defeated and killed so that he would be free once for all of the general's baleful presence in the country. He wrote to Sumail and offered his regrets: he was unable to help because of the famine which had claimed all his resources.<sup>1</sup>

In desperation Sumail turned to his own tribe, the Qaisites, bound to him by ties of tribal loyalty. These Qaisites were from the divisions of Damascus and Qinassareen, settled in Elvira and Jaen respectively. His fellow Qaisites put together a regiment of 400 horse which sped north to succour their chief in distress. It arrived just as the situation was turning desperate for Sumail and his

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 238 ; Ibn Khaldun : vol 4, p 261.



handful of defenders. When the Yamanites heard of the approach of the relief column, whose strength they over-estimated, they raised the siege and withdrew some distance from the city. This helped the Qaisites to establish contact with their chief without fighting and to relieve the defenders after their seven months' siege.

Sumail did not waste any time in Saragosa. Knowing that his enemies would be back when they learned how small the relief column was, he hastily abandoned the capital of the frontier and set off in the direction of Toledo. The Yamanites returned and entered Saragosa as conquerors. Amir bin Amr declared himself Governor of Spain on behalf of the Abbasid Caliph and the entire north-eastern province went out of Cordoba's control. This happened in the early months of 137 Hijri (late summer of 754).

Yusuf did not want Sumail back in Cordoba. He had enjoyed his freedom from the dominating and domineering presence of the Syrian general. So he appointed him Governor of Toledo, and Sumail took up his residence in the old Visigothic capital. He had no intention of doing any more for Yusuf and for Spain than was absolutely necessary, and he settled down in Toledo to a life of leisure and heavy drinking.



Towards the end of the same year, 137 Hijri (about April - May 755)<sup>1</sup> Yusuf marched to Saragosa with a large force to reconquer the capital of the frontier. He laid siege to the city, and it was a very tight siege indeed. All access and exit was blocked. No provisions could go in and the garrison and the inhabitants were completely isolated. As a result of this, such food stocks as existed within the city were soon consumed by the considerable population and the forces of Amir and Hubab positioned in the capital. The common people of Saragosa had no great interest in the factional struggle for power and thought only of putting an end to the suffering imposed upon them by the siege. Even the rebel soldiers were lukewarm in their loyalty to their commanders and saw no point in risking their lives in a clash which meant nothing to them. Their representatives consequently parleyed with Yusuf. If Yusuf

would raise the siege, take no punitive action against the soldiers in Saragosa and let everything return to *Status quo ante*, they would hand over to him the leaders of the insurrection. The Governor was only too glad to find an easy and peaceful solution to the problem and agreed to the proposal.

The rebels appear to have planned their move very carefully, probably with the connivance of most of their fellow soldiers. They seized Amir, Amir's son and Hubab, and delivered them into the hands of Yusuf's soldiers waiting outside the city. The siege was raised, the rebels laid down their arms and the government re-established its authority over Saragosa and the Upper Frontier. This happened at the beginning of 138 Hijri (mid 755). The last of the rebellions against the authority of Yusuf was over.

From Saragosa Yusuf and his army set off on their return journey to Cordoba with their three distinguished prisoners in chains. At a council of elders held during the journey, Yusuf had to go along with the general consensus and spare the lives of the prisoners. They would not be executed. However, while still some distance from Toledo, on the bank of the River Jarama (Valley of Sharanba) the returning governor was met by Sumail, and on Sumail's advice had the three leaders beheaded.<sup>2</sup> This cold-blooded act, after the open declaration of clemency, did nothing to improve the image of Yusuf amongst the people.

Hardly had the three important leaders been disposed of when a messenger came riding into Yusuf's camp with a letter from his son Abdur Rahman, whom he had left in Cordoba. The son informed the father that a youth of the Bani Umayya, who called himself Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, had landed on the coast of Spain near Al Munakkab (Al Munecar) and had called the Arabs of Spain to join his standard. Umayyad sympathisers living in Elvira had already done so and others were likely to follow.

The days of Yusuf and Sumail were numbered. The Fugitive prince had arrived — Abdur Rahman al Dakhil — *the Immigrant*.

1. It could have been the beginning of 138 Hijri (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 38).

1. It could have been the beginning of 138 Hijri (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 38).  
2. Wadi Sharanba (Akhbar Majmua: p 77). According to Maqqari (vol 3, p 32) this happened in Wadi-ur-Ramal (Guadarrama). The valley of Sharanba was probably located in the Guadarramas.



## 8: THE START OF THE RECONQUEST

Western writers have made much of the Battle of Covadonga. They have glorified it as an epic of military history, elevating it to the level almost of a decisive battle of the Western World — the point where Christianity was saved, the point where the reconquest of Spain began. Pelayo has been hailed as the Father of the Reconquest. What this battle actually was — its scope, character and significance — has already been described in Chapter 2.

The reason for this glorification of Pelayo and Covadonga is that the Christians had hardly any heroes at that time. There were no victories to sing about. Covadonga was a break in the unbroken chain of Christian defeats at the hands of the Muslims. The Christians of Spain has at last been able to withstand a Muslim attack and not disintegrate under its impact, even score a minor tactical success. To be fair, even that was a notable achievement for a shattered and demoralised nation, and the credit for it goes to the brave Pelayo.

He made full use of the Muslim setback at Poitiers by raiding the Muslim-held districts of Asturias, details of which have been given at the beginning of Chapter 6. The hit-and-run tactics employed by him were entirely suitable for a general in his position. He was wise enough (after the folly of letting himself be trapped at Covadonga) not to stick his neck out too far, wise enough to stay close to his mountain fortress. In this manner he was able to survive and also keep his movement alive. His aim of creating alarm and despondency among the Muslims was not attained, but his light guerilla operations did have the result of magnifying the image of Pelayo as *Caudillo* of the Christians and head of the resistance.

In terms of geographical conquest he achieved practically nothing. The territory under his control was little more than the area contiguous with the Picos de Europa, which the Muslims had left to him anyway. But in terms of public image he became known to all Christians in the northern zone of Spain, i.e. Galicia, Asturias, Cantabrica and the Basque mountainous area to the east. His fame grew. As a result, he was visited at Conga de Onis by Alfonso, son of Duke Pedro of Cantabrica. Nothing is known about the old duke beyond the fact that he was a Gothic nobleman. At Conga de Onis, Pelayo gave his daughter Ermesinda in marriage to Alfonso, thus cementing a relationship between the leading

families of Asturias and Cantabrica.

Pelayo led the Asturians with varying fortunes as *Caudillo* (not king) for 18 years. When he died in 737, he had already established a small mini-state in Picos de Europa with its humble capital at Conga de Onis. He was followed by his son Favila, who, at the end of an uneventful chieftainship of two years, was killed by a bear during a hunt. In 739 Pelayo's son-in-law Alfonso was elected to lead both the Asturians and the Cantabrians. Alfonso is regarded as the first *King* of Asturias, the first of several Alfonsos, and he was to earn the application of Alfonso the Catholic.<sup>1</sup>

Alfonso the First continued to reign over his little kingdom from Conga de Onis and for many years did nothing but watch and wait. The start of the Muslim civil war in Spain in the year following his accession proved a Godsend to him because the Muslims would be too pre-occupied with their own troubles to pay any attention to the Christian rebels in the north. It was not till the famine added its destructive burden to that of civil war that Alfonso sallied forth to exploit its effects and pick up the pieces.

The drought which began in 131 Hijri (748) and led to famine and pestilence appears to have hit the Muslims harder than the Christian barbarians in the north of Spain. Perhaps the latter were better off in their green, misty mountains. By 133 Hijri (750) the famine was at its horrible worst and the Berbers began to move out of the region to migrate to the south. Alfonso, a cunning and ambitious monarch, was not slow to take advantage of the suffering of the Muslims and the military weakness which resulted from their migration.

The first thing he did, and this was in 751, was to prod the Galicians into action, and these wild barbarians advanced against the few Muslims left in the province. It was a slow and hesitant movement, not for lack of resolve on their part but because of the respect, even awe, in which the Muslims were held. Slowly and steadily the Berbers were pushed out of Galicia to Astorga which lay south of the Asturias Mountains. This was followed by a move from the north, from the Asturian Mountains, against Astorga and Leon which were held by a lesser number of Berbers who had stayed behind in the hope of riding out the famine and holding on to their properties. Yet, in spite of the numerical weakness of the Muslims, Alfonso made slow progress and it was some time before he was able to drive his opponents out of Asturias and Leon.

1. Pidal: vol 6, p 35.



The Muslims retreated, even if it was a stubborn, fighting retreat. The odds were against them. There was no help from Cordoba which in any case regarded the Berbers as enemies. They fought all the way, in hill and valley, in town and village, but were nevertheless forced southwards. They evacuated all of Galicia and North Central Spain. The fittest of them survived: the weakest were left behind along with those who still hoped to survive in lands which they had come to regard as their own. The forces which pushed them back were hunger and Alfonso.

His barbarian hordes, picking up courage, swept across the plain of Castile, butchering every Muslim found in the towns and villages, every man, woman and child.<sup>1</sup> Not a soul was spared. It was not only the Berbers and the Arabs who were slaughtered; the Christians also killed their own kind — Galicians, Castilians, Spaniards and Goths who had taken to Islam in large numbers.<sup>2</sup> Many waverers whose faith was not strong went back to Christianity.<sup>3</sup> The carnage was accompanied by mass destruction. The Christians burnt houses, mosques, schools, leaving towns and villages as smouldering ruins. All places of habitation were laid waste as a result of this devastation. It was a holocaust.

Alfonso cleared the region of the Muslims. He also cleared it of the Christians, though not through death. All the Christians in the region, hitherto living in peace with their Muslim neighbours, were rounded up and herded northwards to Asturias and Cantabrica. Many of them, however, appear to have eluded Alfonso's net and continued to live on their farms and hamlets, away from the main roads, preferring the comfort and prosperity of their plains to the harsh life of the mountains which were home to Alfonso.

By 754 (136 Hijri) the Berbers had fallen back to the line of the Guadarramas and the plains of Caceres and Merida. The boundary of the Muslim state now ran along the Lower Duero (in present day Portugal), the Gredos and Guadarrama Mountains to the Basque region. Muslim frontier towns now were Coimbra, Talavera, Toledo, Guadalajara, Tudela and Pamplona.<sup>4</sup> Everything north of this line was in Christian hands — all of Galicia and Castile north of the Guadarramas and west of the Ebro.

1. Pidal : vol 6, p 132.
2. Levy-Provencal: p 46.
3. Akhbar Majmua: p 62
4. Dozy: p 412.

Furthermore, north of the Duero, Alfonso played havoc with the country, turning the plains of North Castile and South Galicia into a desert, levelling towns, even dismantling castles.<sup>1</sup> The entire region was depopulated and devastated.

In between the two zones, the Muslim and the Christian, now lay a wasteland in which the hand of man completed the devastation started by the famine. Western writers tell us that this was part of the grand strategical design of Alfonso to create a no-man's-land of desolation which would provide no sustenance to any Muslim army which might venture northwards, and that he moved the Christian population to create a greater defensive capability in his own Asturian and Cantabrian mountains.<sup>2</sup> Whether a mountain chieftain elevated by his barbarian subjects to the rank of king would be capable of such a grand strategical concept is a question which cannot be easily answered. It is more likely that his hordes, in their pillage, put to the torch every building in the region not used by them for their own accommodation — a task in which they were encouraged, even directed, by Alfonso, who now emerged with the image of the great conqueror and avenger.

All that remains to be told about the rise of the Christians in the north of Spain is the rebellion of the Basques. Emulating the example of the Galicians and the Asturians, the Basques also took up arms against the Muslims and by 755 (137 - 138 Hijri) were in open rebellion. Pamplona declared its independence. This place was close to the Muslim Frontier Province which acted as a strategic base for Narbonne and was therefore of greater concern to Cordoba. Yusuf consequently made an attempt, albeit a half-hearted one, to regain control over Pamplona. Shortly after the recovery of Saragosa, while on his way back to Cordoba in mid 755 (early 138 Hijri) he sent a detachment under two generals, Sulaiman bin Shihab and Hussain al Aqeeli, to reconquer Pamplona, but this force met a disastrous end at the hands of the Basques. Sulaiman and most of his men were killed while Hussain with a handful of soldiers survived the encounter and got back to Saragosa.<sup>3</sup> Pamplona too was now lost to the Muslims.

King Alfonso the Catholic reigned for another two years. He died in 757, a year after the arrival of Abdur Rahman the

1. Pidal: vol 6, p 32; Sanchez-Albornoz: *The kingdom of Asturias*: p 177.
2. Sanchez-Albornoz: *The Kingdom of Asturias*: pp 172-173.
3. Dozy: p 117; Enan: vol 1, p 134; Akhbar Majmua : p 77. According to Pidal (vol 6, p 274) both the generals were killed.







sword. The Franks left behind them a trail of desolation and ruin all the way to Narbonne, where they were checked by the powerful fortifications of the city manned by courageous and skilful defenders.

For four years (755 - 759) the Franks maintained the siege of Narbonne. All attempts to storm the fortress were foiled by the Muslims until, in the end, the Christian besiegers were more tired of the operation than the Muslim besieged. Having lost hope of taking Narbonne by force or military skill, Pepin now resorted to trickery and treachery. He parleyed with the Christian inhabitants of the city, promised them any terms they wished in return for their cooperation. All they had to do was to open a gate at a predetermined moment in order to let the Franks in.

One night soon after, at a moment of carelessness on the part of Muslim guards at the chosen gate, the citizens pounced upon them and killed them. They opened the gate and Pepin's warriors poured into the city like an irresistible flood. This was quite fair. Stratagem and guile are part of war and the Muslims too had taken fortified towns through the treachery of the inhabitants. But what the Muslims had not done was to butcher every man, woman and child in a conquered town, which is what Pepin and his savages now did to the Muslims. Here too not a soul was spared.

This beautiful city in the south of France, one of the most ancient in the land, the pride of the Romans, ruled and embellished by the Muslims over nearly half a century, reverted to its barbarian masters and barbarian ways.... "lapsed into the general darkness which then pervaded Christian Europe".<sup>1</sup> The Muslims would never again conquer and keep any part of France, except for short periods.



Thanks to the famine and the civil war, a third of Spain was lost to Islam, in just five years, while Yusuf and Sumail were reigning the country. Pamplona was lost in the last year of Yusuf's rule. Alfonso I died a year after Yusuf ceased to be governor; and Narbonne fell two years later.

This loss was temporary. The Muslims would come back again and drive the Christians back to their mountains, but the seed planted by the starving Pelayo in his cave at Covadonga would

1. Ameer Ali: p. 163.

continue to germinate and eventually bear fruit. The Christians too would return. The tide would ebb and flow with now Muslims, now Christians dominating the north-central and north-western region of Spain. This seesaw movement would continue for 2½ centuries until the time of Al Mansur (Almanzor to the Christians) who would reconquer almost the entire peninsula. Again the Muslims would be thrown back to return yet again under the Berber dynasties, though never with the force of Al Mansur. Finally, fortune would turn in favour of the Christians until the tragic fall of Granada at the end of the 15th century.

Here we are concerned with this first loss of a third of Spain, and the thoughtful reader may like to pause and ponder over the causes of this major setback to the Muslims. They had come to conquer the land, not to raid it. They made it part of the Muslim world. A large number of Spaniards had been converted to Islam and the process of conversion was proceeding rapidly and smoothly. They should have stayed. Spain — all of Spain — should have remained a part of the Muslim world.

This loss of a third of the land in a brief period of five years resulted from the famine, from Arab tribalism and from the rule of Yusuf and Sumail. The famine was an act of God; the Muslims could do nothing about it. Perhaps God wished to give the Christian a chance and also wished to test the Muslims. But the next cause was entirely man-made, viz the civil war in North Africa and Spain, which was the effect of gross mal-administration by the Viceroy of Qairowan following the policies and whims of the Umayyad Caliphs in Damascus. The Berber versus Arab war spilled over from North Africa to Spain, but here it soon ended and was replaced by another civil war: Arab versus Arab. This was Arab tribalism at its worst.

It was Balj bin Bishr who gave this war its first impetus. The hard-driving Syrian general played a prominent role in breaking the power of the Berber rebellion, but then himself launched the Arab versus Arab war. The tribal rift became deeper, inflicting painful wounds on the body of Muslim unity. A solution to this rift was found in the constitutional compromise arrived at between the Muzarites and the Yamanites with the arrangement of the one year alternating governments. But even this arrangement, which was the only one holding any promise of success, was broken by Sumail who doggedly pursued his aim of maintaining a factional domination over the country. This weakened the Muslim state,



depriving it of the unity and will needed to deal with the rising power of the Christians. The field was left open to them.

Narbonne would probably have been lost anyway, in view of its distance and geographical detachment from the main body of Muslim Spain and also because of the rising power of the Franks under the powerful Carolingian Dynasty. But the presence of Abdur Rahman bin Alqama, "Knight of Spain", would have made itself felt and the story of Narbonne may have read differently. He was not there because he had been assassinated. He had been assassinated because he raised the standard of revolt against Yusuf and Sumail. He raised the standard of revolt against Yusuf and Sumail because they had broken the constitutional arrangement because they wanted to retain power in the country for their own faction, which meant more to them than the good of Muslim Spain.

In the final analyses, it was Arab tribalism and misrule by Yusuf and Sumail which were the fundamental causes of the loss of a third of Spain to the Christians during the period 750-755. The incompetent Yusuf and the evil Sumail gave it to them on a plate. Ever since then the Muslims have accused the Christians of brutality and a heartless exploitation of Muslim difficulties. These charges are valid. Yet, in reality, the blame lies with the Muslims who got what they asked for. These were self-inflicted wounds.

We must now leave Spain for the space of a chapter, while the blundering Yusuf and the scheming Sumail plan their next move, and follow the wanderings of the Fugitive Prince.

## 9: THE FUGITIVE PRINCE

Time was running out for the House of Umayya in Damascus. As it neared its end it was wracked by violent change. Waleed II, son of Yazeed II, had been hardly a year on the caliphal throne when he was killed by his cousin, Yazeed III, son of Waleed I. Yazeed III was Caliph for hardly 5 months when he died and was succeeded by his brother Ibrahim. Ibrahim was Caliph for a little more than two months when he was ousted by his uncle Marwan bin Muhammad, who then killed and crucified his nephew.<sup>1</sup> It is said that he even disinterred the body of Yazeed III and crucified it.<sup>2</sup> The Umayyad caliphate now had its last ruler, who began his rule in November 744 (Safar 127 Hijri).

Marwan was a different kind of Umayyad. A man of courage and intelligence, he had a passion for history and was not given to the luxurious and hedonistic ways of the Umayyad court. An experienced soldier and an able general, he favoured the spartan life of the military camp over the luxuries of Damascus. They called him Marwan the Ass,<sup>3</sup> not because he was stupid but because, like the Arabian ass, he was possessed of physical strength as well as will and perseverance in battle.<sup>4</sup> He moved his court and all government offices to Harran, in Mesopotamia. He was to rule for almost six years before the fall of the dynasty, and they were difficult years — unstable, violent and bloody.

The storm which was to overthrow the dynasty rose in the east in 747 (129 Hijri) and one after the other, Ferghana, Samarqand and Merv fell to Abu Muslim, the able general whose victories put the Abbasids on the throne. The Imam of the Abbasids, Ibrahim, a noble and gentle youth, was a prisoner in the hands of the Caliph, and Marwan had him put to death in a horrible way, by thrusting his head into a leather bag filled with quicklime.<sup>5</sup> The civil war entered its final stage on the banks of the River Zab, a tributary of the Tigris, south-east of Mosul. The battle was fought beside the village of Kushaf in January 750 (Jamadi-ul-Akhir 132 Hijri) and Marwan was decisively defeated by the Abbasid army.

1. Masudi: *Muruj*: vol 3, p 239.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 59; According to Ibn-ul-Aseer (vol 5, p 120) it was the people of Damascus who did this.

3. Abul Fida: vol 1, p 210.

4. Ameer Ali: p 168; Hitti: p 284.

5. Masudi: *Muruj* vol 3, p 260.



Two months later Abul Abbas as-Saffah — *the Slaughterer* — brother of the murdered Ibrahim, became the first Caliph of the House of Abbas at Baghdad. Meanwhile, Marwan was on the run, fleeing from point to point with Abbasid columns in hot pursuit. He first went to Mosul, then to Harran, then to Emessa, then to Damascus, then to Palestine, with his pursuers close upon his heels. He crossed to Egypt and went up the Nile with a handful of his faithful soldiers. His pursuers finally caught up with him at Buseer (Busiris) on the west bank of the Nile in the district of Fayyum, where he had taken shelter in a old Christian chapel.

The hunted Caliph turned at bay, sword in hand, determined to sell his life dearly. In the short and sharp struggle which ensued he was transfixed by a lance. This happened on August 6, 750 (Zul Haj 27, 132 Hijri). The Umayyad Caliph was in his mid-sixties when he died, the last of a dynasty which had ruled the world of Islam for ninety years — ninety three by lunar reckoning.<sup>1</sup>

The fall of the dynasty was followed by fearful butchery of its survivors by the Abbasids. The new rulers set out to exterminate the Umayyad family, wipe it out, root and branch with the least mercy. The remotest places were searched and the fugitives tracked down and put to death when found. Even the bones of Umayyad caliphs were dug up and scattered and the embalmed body of the illustrious Caliph, Hisham bin Abdul Malik, dead for 7 years, was disinterred, given eighty lashes and burnt.<sup>2</sup>

It was a horrible way to change a government. The Umayyads felt the full blast of Arab vindictiveness. But let it be said in all fairness that the savagery with which the Abbasids treated the Umayyads was no worse than the savagery shown by the Umayyads in their dealings with their enemies.



One of those who survived the slaughter was a young prince, Abdur Rahman, son of Muawia and grandson of Caliph Hisham bin Abdul Malik. On a summer's day in 750, he sat in a darkened room in a village on the wooded east bank of the Euphrates. He had got some infection of the eyes; they were hurting him. He and those with him were keeping extremely quiet, making themselves

1. His age is given variously as 70, 69, 62, 58. (Masudi: *Muruj*: vol 3, p 247; Abul Fida: vol 1, p 212).
2. Hitti : p 286.

inconspicuous as hunted animals might do to evade a persistent hunter. He knew that the troops of cavalry flying the black standard of the victorious Abbasids were on his scent, scouring the countryside for him. He had no doubt about what they would do to him if they found him. It took all the courage of his youthful heart to keep calm and self-possessed.

The young man was endowed with all the qualities of head and heart, all the strength of body and mind which promise fame and greatness. But tragedy and horror were to become his companions early in life. He was not yet twenty. He was born in 731 (113 Hijri) at Dair Hena in the district of Damascus,<sup>1</sup> and was still a child when he lost his father who was being groomed for the throne by Caliph Hisham. After the recent violent overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty, the new Abbasid Caliph had declared an amnesty and the family of Abdur Rahman — he and his brother and sisters — thought that they would be safe. But despite the amnesty his brother Yahya was seized and slain as part of the general slaughter of the Umayyads and Abdur Rahman was lucky to get away with his life. He fled from home, accompanied by some members of his family, and took shelter in a house on the bank of the Euphrates. He hoped that at least here he would be safe.

He was a tall, lean, athletic youth with blue eyes under fine eyebrows and a large nose, but it is said that he had no sense of smell. His long brown hair hung in two plaits on either side of his face, upon which a mole was prominently visible.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he got his fair skin from his Berber mother, Raha, a beauty from the tribe of Nafza inhabiting the region of Tripoli,<sup>3</sup> who had been brought to Damascus as a captive and grabbed by Muawia, the father of this young prince. That was in the days described in Chapter 5 when unscrupulous governors and officials would snatch beautiful wives and daughters from Berber homes to replenish the harems of Syria.

1. There is some confusion about this. The place is also called Hasna and Khenan and also located in the district of Qinassareen in northern Syria. His birth place has also been named Ulia in the district of Tadmur (Palmyra). (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 47; Maqqari: vol 3, p 48; Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 37; Enan : vol 1, p 149; Akhbar Majmua: p 50.)
2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 48; Maqqari: vol 1, p 332. The Arabic *ashab* (as-hab) which is applied to this youth covers the entire range of fair hair from blonde to red to brown.
3. Ibn Khaldun; vol 4, p 264. Others locate Nafza near Ceuta, on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast. The latter could also be correct.



He was a pensive youth, given to introspection. He had the gift of eloquence which was common to the Arabs of the time, and was also a poet. He possessed tremendous resolution which would in time be hardened by events. In the peace and quiet of his darkened room he went over the events of his recent past, the terrible fall of the dynasty to which he belonged. The gates of glory and greatness were closed to him in his Arab homeland — Syria, Iraq, Arabia — which was now in the power of the Abbasids. He would have to seek his fortune elsewhere. He thought he would go to the Maghreb, the distant land of his mother.

With him in this house were his younger brother, a boy of thirteen, two sisters, his infant son Sulaiman, now four years old, and a trusted freedman named Badr. The child went out of the house but soon came rushing in again, crying and screaming with fear. He threw himself into his father's arms. Abdur Rahman tried to push him away. His eyes were troubling him. But the child clung to him and would not be comforted. Abdur Rahman went out to see for himself what had frightened the child and found the village in commotion. The black standards were everywhere. The hunters had arrived to claim their prey.

His young brother ran out of the house, pausing only to shout, "Fly, O brother, the black standards are here!" Abdur Rahman, grabbed a bag of dinars, told his sisters where he was going and instructed them to send Badr to join him there, and flew after his brother. The two of them hid at a spot not far from the village and watched as the horsemen surrounded their house. They found no trace of the boys and did no harm to the women and the child.

Soon after his hasty exit from the house Abdur Rahman saw a man he knew and trusted, and asked him to buy two horses and provisions for a journey. The man sent a slave to the market to make the purchases, but as ill luck would have it this slave was an agent of the new government and at once informed the commander of the Abbasid detachment about the hiding place of the fugitives. Before long a troop of horse was on its way to get the princes.

The princes saw them coming and took to their heels, dashing into a nearby orchard for cover, but they were seen and the orchard was surrounded by the soldiers. The only way open led to the Euphrates and the princes made for the river bank with the black standards in close pursuit. They got to the bank before their

pursuers and flung themselves into the river just as the horsemen arrived and stopped at the bank. One of the riders prepared to pursue the fugitives in the river but was dissuaded by his comrades. The horsemen stood and watched the boys swim away, meanwhile calling to them, "Come back! You will not be harmed!"

Abdur Rahman was a powerful swimmer and struck out boldly for the far bank. The Euphrates is not as wide here (North-Eastern Syria) as is Southern Iraq, but it was nevertheless a challenge. The little brother followed, urged on by the big one's words of encouragement, while the horsemen on the bank continued their efforts to entice them back. As they were nearing mid-stream the younger one began to tire. Then he panicked, fearing that he would drown. Suddenly he turned and began to swim back to the bank he had just left. Abdur Rahman saw this move and shouted, "You will be killed, O brother! Come to me!" The boy either did not hear the words or was too tired to swim on. Like the proverbial drowning man clutching at a straw, he believed in his childish heart the promise of amnesty which the black flags has given and swam back to them. He got to the bank at the same time as the elder brother walked dripping out of the water on the opposite bank.

Abdur Rahman turned to see his brother throw himself at the feet of his pursuers. Then, to use his own words, "They caught my brother who had come to them under the promise of amnesty. They cut off his head. They took his head away. And I was watching!"<sup>1</sup> They took the head away as a prize. Apparently, a boy of thirteen was old enough to be killed with pride.

Abdur Rahman was filled with horror. He turned and ran blindly towards a forest where he hid himself until he was sure that the search had been abandoned. All he had was the clothes he wore and a bag of gold dinars.

This was to be the beginning of a long and arduous journey which took him across Syria, Palestine and Egypt to North Africa, a journey of 4000 miles, wandering for more than five years. He would never be free of alarm and danger, often just one jump ahead of his pursuers, living now with bedouins and shepherds, now by himself, braving hardships and perils. Through the vicissitudes of fortune he would take comfort and encouragement from a childish memory of an event which occurred nine years before — a memory

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 28; Ibn-ul-Aseer; vol 5, p 184.



which would lead him on like an inner light through the darkest moments of his long march.

He was then 10 years old. His grandfather, Hisham bin Abdul Malik was Caliph. At Rusafa, in the district of Qinassareen in Northern Syria, where Hisham was residing, the child went to his grandfather's chamber where the latter's brother Maslama was also present.<sup>1</sup> The Caliph was busy and made a sign to the child to go away. As he turned to depart, his great uncle came to him, picked him up and clasped him to his breast.

Maslama was believed to be a psychognomist, one who could see the destiny of people in their faces. He turned to his brother. "Let him stay, O Commander of the Faithful," he said. "He is the lord of the House of Umayya, their refuge in the time of the decline of their power. He will be the restorer of their realm after its fall. Be good to him".<sup>2</sup>

Thereafter the boy enjoyed a position of privilege in the home and heart of Hisham bin Abdul Malik, the last of the great caliphs of the House of Umayya. Apart from seeing to the boy's upbringing and education, the Caliph also ensured Abdur Rahman's economic well-being by making over to him the property of the Caliph which accrued from the spoils of Spain. This was a considerable source of income, to tap which a man named Saeed bin Abi Laila was sent to Spain every year.<sup>3</sup>



It was somewhere in Palestine that Abdur Rahman was joined by his freedman Badr and a man named Salem who was the freedman of his sister, Umm-ul-Asbagh. To pay for the needs of her brother she sent money and jewels with her ex-slave who would be his faithful companion during his wanderings. For some time Abdur Rahman remained in Palestine, lying low to avoid detection, and then struck out southwards. He entered Egypt, and here too he lived in obscurity for a time before going on to Barqa by the Mediterranean coast, in present day North-Eastern Libya.

In Barqa their stay proved a very long one. According to one source the prince and the ex-slaves spent five years here,<sup>4</sup> but this

1. Rusafa was the Caliph's residence in the country, or a country house. It was a beautiful villa between Palmyra and the Euphrates.
2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 63; Ibn Izari : vol 2, p 41.
3. Maqqari: vol 1, p 33; Gayangos: vol 2, p 92.
4. Maqqari: vol 3, p 29.

report is exaggerated. In view of the timing of other events before and after Barqa his stay at this place could not have been more than two years. They were relatively safe here from their pursuers because this was outside Egypt and the writ of the Abbasids did not run beyond Egypt. Barqa was a part of North Africa which was still ruled by Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, whose seizure of power has been narrated in Chapter 5. After a long stay in Barqa the prince moved on to Tripoli, where he was warmly received by the Berber tribe of Nafza — the tribe of his mother.<sup>1</sup>

He was free of danger from the Abbasids but the prince now faced a new danger, this time from the Viceroy of Qairowan, Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb. This Viceroy was attended at his court by a Jew who had once lived in Syria in the service of Maslama bin Abdul Malik, great uncle of the young prince, whose talent for predicting future events has already been mentioned. From him the Jew had acquired some knowledge of the occult sciences and would now make his own judgements and predictions. He would advise the Viceroy about what was going on in the world and what was going to happen. One of his predictions was that a man from the Quraish, more precisely from the Bani Umayya, would ascend the throne of Spain and start a new dynasty. His name would be Abdur Rahman and he would wear his hair in two plaits.

The Viceroy pondered over this. Since his own name was Abdur Rahman he thought that this entitled him to the throne of Spain, if only he grew his hair in two plaits, but he was discouraged from this line of thinking by the Jew on the grounds that he was not from the predicted clan.<sup>2</sup> Although he was now persuaded that Spain was not for him, he was nevertheless concerned by the prediction because his own cousin Yusuf was governor of that country and he did not wish to see his rule upset or interrupted. He was determined to find out if any Abdur Rahman with his hair in two plaits had entered his territory. To this end, he despatched agents to search town and country in North Africa, and one of these agents was able to locate our Abdur Rahman with two plaits at Tripoli. The prince was brought to Qairowan where he found himself face to face with his namesake, the Viceroy.

1. There is some confusion here. Ibn Khaldun (vol 4, p 262) mentions Nafza as being in Tripoli. We know that the Nafza inhabited the region of Ceuta where Abdur Rahman would ultimately seek refuge with his maternal uncles. There may have been two groups of Nafza with strong mutual tribal bonds in spite of distance between their habitations.
2. Akbar Majmua: p 54; Dozy: p 165.



The aged Viceroy looked at the young prince. He did not failed to notice an air of majesty, a dignity of bearing, a certain grace about his person, qualities which did nothing to reassure the Viceroy. The young man could be and probably was dangerous. He turned to the Jew. "This is he," he whispered. "I am going to kill him."

The Jew was aghast at this turn of events. Perhaps some trace still remained in him of the old loyalty which he had once owed to the family of the helpless fugitive. He opposed his chief with the simple but undeniable logic: "If you kill him, it is not he. If you let him go, it is he."<sup>1</sup>

The Viceroy let him go, and Abdur Rahman made haste to depart. He went west, his immediate concern being to put as much distance as possible between himself and Qairowan, just in case the Viceroy changed his mind, as he would presently do.

Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb was a man of shifting loyalties. He had once wanted Spain, but when he knew that he could not have it he came to North Africa and seized power by means which were not short of unethical. When the Umayyads were overthrown he waited until it was evident that the Abbasides were firmly in control of the east, then he offered his allegiance to the Abbasid Caliph. Soon after Mansur came to the throne as the second Caliph of the dynasty, a dispute arose between the Caliph and the Viceroy of North Africa. The latter was not sending any money as taxes and tribute. This led to an exchange of rude letters between the two and Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb decided to break with Baghdad, which was the new capital of the Muslim world.

He called a congregation in the grand mosque of Qairowan where he openly denounced the Abbasids and abused the Caliph. "I discard him," he declared, "as I discard this my shoe". With a dramatic gesture he took off one shoe and threw it away. He also discarded the black robes which were symbolic of the Abbasids and the wearing of which denoted allegiance to the Abbasid Caliphate. "This dress," he said, "is the dress of the people of hell in hell!" He had the black robes burned.<sup>2</sup>

Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb not only rejected the Abbasids but also showed little pity to the Umayyads, many of whom had sought refuge in North Africa. Two princes living in Qairowan were killed while other members of the Umayyad clan were persecuted

1. Ibn Izari vol 2, p 41; Maqqari: vol 3, pp 28-29.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 1, p 67.

and harassed. The Viceroy would himself be later assassinated by his own brothers and would be followed on the viceregal throne by his brother Ilyas.



The journey of the Fugitive Prince now turned into a flight, because agents of the Viceroy were after him. The Viceroy had made up his mind about the Umayyad youth; no matter what the Jewish soothsayer said, he was going to kill him. At one place young Abdur Rahman was sheltering with a Berber chief named Abu Qurrah Wanesus when the Viceroy's soldiers caught up with him and began to search the tents of the tribal encampment. The chief's wife, Tekfah, was able to save her guest only by hiding him in the folds of her dress. Abdur Rahman would never forget this event; he would later invite the chief and his wife to Spain and shower honors upon them and give them the freedom of his palace in Cordoba.

Abdur Rahman spent some time living in Berber settlements around Teehart (Tiaret, in present North-Western Algeria), then moved further west. He stayed longer with some clans than with others, with any which would offer a welcome to a penniless fugitive. He wandered through the tribes of Maknasa and Zannata, at times being well received and made to feel at home, at others being told to move on and even ill-treated.

Very little is known about what must undoubtedly have been a remarkable odyssey and what is known is confusing. But it was a desperate and saddened young man who picked his weary way across the mountains and deserts of the Maghreb, never sure where his next meal would come from or at what unexpected spot an assassin would strike. He had hoped to established himself in North Africa, but North Africa was clearly not for him; in fact it was out to destroy him. Yet, he never forgot the prediction of his great-uncle that he would be the restorer of Umayyad power and glory. If only he could find some place in which to restore his fallen dynasty!

His wanderings ended when he got to the Mediterranean coast. It is not certain what place on the coast this was. According to some it was Melilla,<sup>1</sup> according to others it was with the tribe of

1. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 262.



Mugheela or Zannata,<sup>1</sup> according to yet others it was in the area of the tribe of Nafza, at a place called Sabra<sup>2</sup> or Nakur.<sup>3</sup> The most likely location is Ceuta,<sup>4</sup> which was definitely inhabited by the Nafza. It was now the early part of the year 754; the Fugitive Prince had been on the run for four years.

Abdur Rahman bin Muawia felt safe at last. Nafza was the tribe of his mother; his hosts were his maternal uncles and cousins and welcomed him as one of their own. The Viceroy of North Africa, the name-sake who would be killed in the following year by his own brothers, seemed to have lost interest in persecuting the ill-starred Umayyad. In any case, his control over the western extremities of North Africa, to which young Abdur Rahman had gone, was weak and he could not get things done as easily here as nearer Qairowan. The prince felt at home; his wanderings were over, or almost over.

He had come all this way with two faithful companions and servants: Badr and Salem, who had braved the perils and rigours of his four-year journey to be with their young master. Salem was a veteran of Spain, having fought there either under Musa bin Nusair or shortly after, and told Abdur Rahman a great deal about the country.<sup>5</sup> But now he left his master because he was rebuked for something trivial which he felt was most unjust in view of all that he had suffered with and for the young prince. He left in a huff and returned to his former mistress in Syria, the sister of Abdur Rahman. The other freedom, Badr, a capable and courageous fellow, remained in attendance upon his master. He would always be with him, would grow old in his service and live long enough to taste the bitter fruit of the ingratitude of an Umayyad prince.

From the coast of North Africa, Abdur Rahman looked across the strait to Spain. He had heard much about the turmoil in Spain — the civil war, the confusion and disorder, the inept government of Yusuf the Fihrite under the malignant shadow of the brilliant Sumail. He knew that there were divisions (*Junds*) of Syrians settled in the southern districts of Spain which were likely to remain loyal to the Umayyad cause. North Africa was beyond his grasp, but Spain was another matter. He would send the faithful Badr to go and see.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, pp 29, 49.

2. Akhbar Majmua : p 55.

3. Levy-Provencal: p 64.

4. Dozy: p 167; Hitti: p 505.

5. Akhbar Majmua: p 55; Dozy: p 167.

## 10: OBJECTIVE SPAIN

Spain was staggering on blindly, driven by the destructive impulse of civil disorder. The tribal conflict of Arab-vs-Arab which followed the racial conflict of Arab-vs-Berber continued to plague the country and caused alarm and despondency in the minds of the faithful. The Yamanites seethed with anger at their subjugation by the minority faction of Muzarites. The wounds of the Battle of Secunda had not healed; rather they continued to fester because of the weak and incompetent rule of Yusuf and the high-handedness of the haughty Sumail. The causes which led to the civil war were still present, in dormant form, ready to plunge the country once again into bloody conflict.

The Christians were advancing from the north and, aided by the famine, had already deprived the Muslims of a third of the peninsula. The Franks were pressing in Septimania, where the fortress of Narbonne was closely invested by Pepin the Short. These counter moves by once humble neighbours were seen with mounting anxiety by thoughtful Muslims. They remembered wistfully the strong and dedicated leadership of the past which, if it has existed at this moment, would throw the Asturians back into their mountains and send the Franks scurrying to the north of France. The famine was mercifully over, but its after-effects remained, leaving the Muslims like a convalescing patient. With the conditions now prevailing in the land, the Muslims could see no hope of a reversal of the situation and a return to the strength, unity and brotherhood of pre-civil war days, unless there was a major change of command and direction. Spain was ripe for a change, any change which promised better times for Islam and the Muslims.

An influential element in the military organisation of Spain was the Syrian contingent which had come with Balj to rescue Spain from the insurgent Berbers. The contingent had been broken up by Abul Khattar and its divisions, or *junds*, dispersed over various districts, as narrated in Chapter 6, but several divisions had taken part as loyalist forces in the battle of Secunda and maintained a tradition of victory in the peninsula. They had earned the gratitude and esteem of Yusuf and Sumail.

The divisions most loyal to the House of Umayya were those of Damascus, settled in Elvira (Granada), and of Qinassareen,



settled in Jaen. They consisted of *clients* of the Bani Umayya, in other words freedmen or descendants of freedmen or of individuals of subordinate clans accepted as proteges (Arabs, not conquered foreigners in this case) whose loyalty to an affiliated clan was as strong as if they were actually born into that clan. The leaders of the division of Damascus at Elvira, which was 400-500 strong, were Abu Usman Ubaidullah bin Usman and his son-in-law, Abdullah bin Khalid, the former acting as the overall commander of the division. These two would carry the Umayyad standard in battle when the division was called up for operations. And these clients of the Umayyads were proud of their links with the parent clan, proud of the achievements of the Umayyads and the domination which the Umayyads exercised in the world of Islam.

It was to Ubaidullah that Abdur Rahman sent his freedman Badr at the very end of 136 Hijri (about June 754). The prince was now at the coast near Melilla, whither he had moved after spending some time with the Nafza. He sent Badr with a letter to Ubaidullah which recounted all the benefits which the clients and their ancestors had received from earlier generations of the Bani Umayya, and he emphasised his claim to the throne as heir to his grandfather, Hisham bin Abdul Malik. He asked the Umayyad clients to rise in his support and promised honour and reward to those who did. Ubaidullah was also advised to seek help from people he could trust and take advantage of the friction existing between the Yamanites and the Muzarites.<sup>1</sup> Abdur Rahman gave Badr his signet ring so that, in coordination with Ubaidullah, he could prepare letters purporting to come from the prince and send them to those who could be of help to the prince's cause. They could seal the letter with the signet ring.

Badr landed at the coast of Elvira, south of the future Granada, whence he made for the residence of Ubaidullah. He gave the chief the Pretender's letter. The old warrior's reaction was a favourable one. His motives, however, were more selfish than noble, for he knew that he had a lot to gain from the establishment of Umayyad rule in Spain. He exchanged letters in secret with Yusuf bin Bukht, chief of the division of Qinassareen at Jaen, and both agreed to seek the advice and help of Sumail. If he threw in his lot with them, their task would be easy; and if he did not, he was at least an honourable man and would not divulge their secret.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 29.

This was the time, in early 137 Hijri (mid 754) when Sumail was under siege in Saragosa, and having been abandoned by Governor Yusuf, had appealed to the Muzarites in the south of Spain for help. Even now a regiment of 400 horsemen was preparing to march north for the relief of their chief, and a detachment consisting of Umayyad clients under Abu Usman and Abdullah bin Khalid was to go with the relief column. The younger of these two, the son-in-law of the other, did not fully trust Sumail. He knew that once Abdur Rahman took the reins of government in his hands, Sumail would lose the position of advantage and influence which he now enjoyed because of the weakness of Yusuf the Fihrite. His natural inclination would be to oppose a change of government. Abdullah therefore proposed that they should tell Sumail that Abdur Rahman had come to Spain only for asylum and to recover the property (money, goods, estates, etc) formerly possessed by his grandfather Hisham and which now legally belonged to the young prince, on the proceeds of which he could live in peace and comfort. The elder, the father-in-law of the other, agreed that they should take this line.<sup>1</sup>

The relief of Saragosa has been described in Chapter 7. Sumail was freed from the pressure of the rebels and the indignity of being invested and having to beg for aid. He was his grand old self again. The Umayyad clients had a private meeting with him to which they took Badr along. They gave him the letter from Abdur Rahman which recalled links of his family with the Bani Umayya and the good done to the former by the latter. Sumail was burning with anger at the way he had been let down by Yusuf who would not come to his help. He burst into a tirade against the Fihrite and heaped abuse upon him. It appears, however, that nothing of substance was discussed in the matter of the Pretender. Sumail received the clients kindly and promised to think about the matter. Then he returned to Cordoba and the Umayyads returned to their homes in Elvira.

Their next meeting took place in Jaen at the end of 137 Hijri (early summer of 755). Yusuf was encamped with various detachments on his march to Saragosa which he intended to wrest from the rebels (and did, as related in Chapter 7). The two Umayyad chiefs presented themselves before the Governor who asked that the soldiers of the Damascus division be sent for duty with the army. They made their excuses — hardship, poverty, lack

1. *Ibid.*



of provision — but promised to join the Governor soon with their followers. They also got 1000 dinars out of him as money required for the preparation of their units for action at Saragosa. As Yusuf marched on, Ubaidullah and Abdullah, accompanied by Badr, went to the tent of Sumail.

As mentioned earlier, Sumail was heavily addicted to the bottle. He would drink every night and he got drunk every night.<sup>1</sup> He was late waking up in the morning and late coming out of his hangover before he could think clearly and act forcefully. This morning a slave woke him up so that he could receive his three visitors. They put to him frankly their plan of getting the young prince over to the peninsula to take charge of things.

Sumail was still fuzzy after his nocturnal revels and once again abused Yusuf for not coming to his help in Saragosa. As for the plan regarding the young prince, his first reaction was a favourable one. He thought he would gain by the prince's coming. "I am with you in what you wish," he said. "Write to him to come. When he is here we will ask Yusuf to accept him with favour and be good to him and give him his daughter in marriage."<sup>2</sup> If he does not agree we will hit him on his bald head with our swords and forcibly transfer authority from him to him"... i.e. from Yusuf to Abdur Rahman.<sup>3</sup>

The visitors were overjoyed. They could have asked for nothing better. With the most powerful general of Spain on their side they would have no trouble implementing their plan. The installation of Abdur Rahman as ruler of Spain was as good as done. They thanked the general profusely; they kissed the general's hand. He was to go to Toledo where he had been appointed governor by Yusuf, but he would not start till the effect of alcohol had worn off. Meanwhile, the Umayyad clients took their leave and set off on the road to Elvira.

It was not long before Sumail's brain was clear of the fumes of alcohol. He suddenly realized with horror the trap which he was letting himself into with Abdur Rahman in, Sumail would be out; and he was not going to have that. He sent a slave galloping after the three travellers to tell them to stop and wait for him.

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 71.

2. The lady was Um Musa, widow of Qatan, son of Abdul Malik who let the Syrians come to Spain and was later killed and crucified by the followers of Balj.

3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 29.

They had already gone a mile when the slave caught up with them and told them to wait the arrival of the general. They waited for him, non-plussed. Then Sumail came cantering up on a white mule which was named Kaukab (Star) and, approaching the Umayyad clients, said: "I have pondered over the matter which I discussed with you. I note that this youth to whose support you call me comes from such a family that if any one of its members were to urinate on this land we would all of us drown in his urine.<sup>1</sup> As for this man (i.e. Yusuf) we have influence over him and we lean towards him. By Allah, if on getting back home you persist in the design which we last discussed, I shall oppose you for my own sake. I can tell you that the first sword drawn against your master will be mine. May Allah guide you in whatever you do!"

This was a slap in the face for the clients, but they quickly recovered their composure. "We have no opinion other than yours", they hastened to reassure him. "We will do as you say."<sup>2</sup>



This door was closed. The Muzarites would not side with them, not as a faction led by Sumail. They would have to explore other avenues, and like true conspirators they set to work to create support for their candidate. They approached the tribes of the Yamanite faction and found them burning with a desire for revenge, seething with hatred of the Muzarites, eager to embrace anyone who would overthrow Yusuf and Sumail. The conspirators fanned the flames of the ancient feud.

Their riders galloped across Southern Spain to every clan, to every household which could be a potential ally and would support the Pretender. They went not only to Yamanite clans but also to Muzarite ones not closely linked with Yusuf and Sumail. They carried letters sealed with the signet ring of the prince whose contents were the same: they extolled the virtues of the Umayyad Caliphate, stressed how terrible was the condition of Spain and how wonderful it would be if Abdur Rahman could become the ruler of the country, his claim resting not only on his being the grandson of the illustrious Caliph Hisham but also on being blessed by God with every quality required for high office.

1. The sense of this was that one Umayyad was enough to set all Spain on fire and destroy everybody.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, pp 30-31; Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 24; Akhbar Majmua: p 73. According to Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 43) Sumail promised them support if Abdur Rahman was coming in peace to just live in Spain and not rule over them.



Almost everywhere the response was positive. Those who were entrusted with the message passed it on to others whom they trusted. Those already converted to the idea of the coming of Abdur Rahman converted yet others. Word of the coming of the Umayyad Prince spread like fire in brushwood. Assurances of support came from all quarters. While Yusuf was busy quelling the rebellion in the Upper Frontier, the country was being stolen from him behind his back.

A year had passed since Badr landed at the Spanish coast. It was now 138 Hijri (which began on June 16, 755). The plotters were ready. All that was required was to get their candidate over to Spain. Ubaidullah and his comrades purchased a vessel and provisioned it for the journey to and from North Africa. Ten loyal men were chosen to go and fetch the prince, and these men included a prominent member of the group named Tamam bin Alqama as-Saqafi, to whom Ubaidullah gave 500 dinars to meet any unforeseen expenses. This was part of the 1000 dinars given to Ubaidullah by Governor Yusuf to prepare his men for action against the rebels in Saragosa. With the ten men went the faithful Badr, to convey to his master the invitation to Spain.

Abdur Rahman had spent a long time cooling his heels. Life was quite agreeable in the small coastal settlement of the Berber tribe of Mugheela, near the town of Melilla. The chief of the settlement, Abu Qurrah Wanesus, was good to him and he was well looked after. This was the chief whose wife had hidden the prince in the folds of her dress when the Viceroy's soldiers had surprised their camp in search of the fugitive. But the prince knew that he was an outcast, the last surviving Umayyad who could claim direct descent from the once ruling family. His hopes could be dashed by fate, and if the Spanish venture failed he would remain an outcast. However, he continued to cherish visions of a new kingdom where he would restore the glory of the house of Umayya as predicted by his great-uncle.

Then one evening, as he was making his ablutions in preparation for the evening prayer, he saw a vessel approaching the coast. The prince waited impatiently. As the vessel hit the beach, Badr leapt out and rushed to his master to give him the good news. In a few words he conveyed the gist of his story. Then others advanced to greet the man who they hoped would be their new king. At their head was Tamam bin Alqama.

## 11: PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

In the afternoon of August 14, 755 (Rabi-ul-Awwal 1, 138 Hijri) the vessel carrying Abdur Rahman landed on the coast of Spain at Al Munakkab (Almunecar), south of the present Granada, and was received with warmth and honour by Ubaidullah bin Usman and Abdullah bin Khalid. It was soon time for the afternoon prayer, and the prince performed the ritual prayer with the two chiefs and other Umayyads who had assembled to welcome him. After prayers they travelled inland to Torrox, where Ubaidullah had his residence. The Pretender would remain here for some time, reflecting upon his circumstance and planning his next move.

Upon arrival at Torrox someone offered him a cup of wine. The prince declined the offer with the words, "I need something to sharpen my awareness, not to dull it." Another well-wisher brought a beautiful slave girl. After looking at her admiringly for a while, he said, "If I stick to my resolution for what I seek, at the expense of paying attention to this girl, it would be unfair to her. If I attend to her, at the expense of what I seek, it would be unfair to my resolution." He declined this offer also.<sup>1</sup>

This was a decisive stage in the life of Abdur Rahman. He was twenty five years of age, in the prime of youth. The last five years had been years of flight from past enemies and from the ruins of his lost heritage. It had been a struggle for survival. What he now faced was not flight but an advance to battle with his future enemies, a battle which would decide whether he would be lord and master or a fugitive and outcast, perhaps a corpse. He was quite clear in his mind that he was not going to settle for anything less than the highest office in the land. He was not about to accept the comfortable and peaceful life of the landed gentry. He would either win and take all or lose and surrender all. There would be no midway course.

Yusuf and Sumail were his potential enemies. They would resist with all their strength the attempt of an outsider to wrest power from them, no matter what the qualifications of that outsider. Yusuf was an old fool who might incline to peace, but Sumail was an old fox who was likely to fight to the last; and since Yusuf was like wax in the general's hands, it was the will of Sumail

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 42.



that would prevail. Abdur Rahman had learnt enough about this odd pair not to trust them and not to believe that they would willingly submit to his demands to step aside. He would have to fight them, overcome their resistance by force and stratagem, before the throne could be his.

His first task was to establish himself in Spain. He had got a foothold, in the land and in the minds of the loyal Syrians, but he must strengthen his base and gather more forces so that he could challenge the authority of the ruling government from a position of strength. He would appeal to national rather than to racial and tribal sentiment, without being averse to exploiting tribal differences when it suited him to do so. He would offer himself as the ruler of all Spaniards regardless of race and faction, as the restorer of the glory and prosperity of Spain, as the answer to everyone's prayer.

At Torrox he received delegations from the Arab clans which inclined towards him and which promised him support. They came from all over the southern part of Spain where Syrian contingents had been dispersed and settled. They included prominent citizens of Muslim Spain — the leaders of Arab clans and of groups of Umayyad clients, tribal chiefs of Syrians and *baladies*, even Berbers. The most notable among his visitors were Yusuf bin Bukht, commander of the division of Qinassareen in Jaen and chief of all Umayyads in Spain: Judar bin Amr, chief of the division of Jordan who later became *Qazi* (judge) of the army, and Abu Abda Hassan bin Malik of Seville, who would one day be appointed *Vizier*. All the chiefs warned the prince against Yusuf and Sumail: "We fear the trickery of Sumail," they confided. "We are never safe from his mischief. As for the Fihrite, we know such and such..."<sup>1</sup>

The ground had been prepared for the coming of their master by the Umayyad clients led by Ubaidullah and Abdullah bin Khalid who had already sent out a call to trustworthy Arab groups to rally on the side of the Umayyad prince. Now Abdur Rahman renewed the call, aiming it at all Muslims — all tribes and clans, Arabs and berbers — all of whom received his embassies and letters urging them to support the prince. The response in general was positive and enthusiastic, particularly in the Syrian *junds* whose chiefs promised immediate allegiance to the prince. The Yamanites too favoured the newcomer against Yusuf and Sumail and secretly assured his envoys of their support. Among the Muzarites opinion

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 45. This is how the narrative is worded in the original.

was divided. Some of them opted for the Umayyad cause but the majority stuck with Yusuf and Sumail. While the reaction on the whole was encouraging, this was not enough. It was necessary for the Pretender to further build up his strength before he could hope for victory against Yusuf and Sumail. He would have to wait.

When despatching his envoys to various parts of Spain, he maintained a posture which suggested that he was no threat to Yusuf and Sumail, hoping to leave them in the dark with regard to his intentions. But Yusuf did come to know what the Umayyads were up to and wrote to their chiefs warning them against disloyalty to the government in power and threatening to punish them should any disloyalty be proved. The Umayyads who received the warning assured the Governor that his fears were unfounded. "The son of Muawia has come to us and to the community of his clients," they wrote. "He seeks only wealth and not what the Governor suspects, may Allah be good to him!"<sup>1</sup>



Yusuf was camped on the bank of the Jarama in the Guadarrama Mountains north of Toledo. He was a worried man, troubled by the turn of events and troubled by his conscience. The force that he had sent to suppress the Basque rebellion had been cut to pieces and few survivors had returned to tell the Governor the story of their defeat. Moreover, he had just carried out, under pressure from Sumail, the execution of the three Arab leaders of the insurgents who had captured Saragosa from Sumail. After the deed was done it weighed heavily on his mind. In a way it was an act of perfidy, because at a council of elders held before the event he had given his word that he would not execute the men.

It was while he was in this dejected mood that the messenger of his son arrived from Cordoba to give him the alarming news of the landing of Abdur Rahman on the coast of Al Munakkab, within the area of the *Jund* of Damascus, of his call to the Arabs to join him and the hearty response of the Umayyad clients who were even now flocking to his standard. Yusuf's cup of bitterness was full already. Now it overflowed. He turned sadly to Sumail: "What do you think of all this?"

Sumail pondered the matter for a while, then said: "My opinion is that we should deal with him before he gets stronger. I do

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 44.



not trust these Yamanites because of the grudge they bear us. We should march against him immediately with whatever troops we have. We will either kill him or drive him away. If he flees he will never again rise against us."

"I agree", Yusuf murmured as he repaired to his tent for the night.

They were an incongruous pair: Yusuf weak, vacillating and muddled; Sumail resolute, strong and clear-headed, when he was not drunk. His strategy was a good one and Yusuf would have gone along with it, but they were overtaken by events.

The message brought by the courier from Corboba had already spread in the army and was being discussed in every tent. The troops were tired. They felt no enthusiasm for going into another battle, especially since in this case they would be fighting for a ruling pair whom no one liked and against a new contender for power who promised a finer quality of leadership and to whom a large number of Arabs had already gone over. Moreover, the soldiers had reacted with disgust at the execution of the three hostages of Saragosa, who were all men of substance and whose lives had earlier been spared by the Governor. After much discussion in the camp, the majority of the soldiers decided that they were not going into another battle merely to uphold the rule of Yusuf and Sumail.

The bulk of the army stole away from the camp. The tribal contingents dispersed to their homes. There was a heavy downpour in the night which muffled the sound of their movement, with the result that the Governor knew nothing about the matter till he woke up in the morning. Then he found that there was hardly anyone there. Those who remained were his slaves, the standard-bearers who were honour-bound to stay with their standards, ten Yamanites and some men of the Bani Qais (a branch of the Muzarites) who were personally attached to their chief Sumail.<sup>1</sup>

A distraught Yusuf sought out Sumail who repeated his suggestion that they should march without delay against Abdur Rahman.<sup>2</sup>

This exasperated Yusuf. "You say this!" he blurted out "With whom are we to advance against him? You can see that the soldiers

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 32; Akhbari Majmua : p 79.

2. According to one source (Maqqari: vol 3, p 32) this last exchange took place at Toledo where Yusuf and Sumail had gone after the dispersal of their army.

have deserted us. Our treasury is empty, our backs are bare, hunger has weakened us on our journey. Let us go to Cordoba and start fresh preparations after we have seen into the matter and the situation is clearer. Perhaps the situation is different to what has been conveyed to us."

"My advice remains the same as I have already given you," Sumail insisted. "I have no other advice to offer. If you do not follow it, your mistake will soon become evident."<sup>1</sup>

If Sumail's advice had been followed the history of Muslim Spain might have taken a different course, for the weakness of Yusuf and Sumail was nothing compared with the vulnerability of Abdur Rahman. But Yusuf was not the man to stand up to such a challenge, not under such circumstances. He ordered a return to Cordoba and the remnants of a once united army of Muslim Spain marched to the capital. A golden opportunity was lost by the Governor of Spain.

Winter was now setting in. There was heavy rainfall which turned the roads to mud. The rivers were swollen. And as if this were not enough to discourage an already reluctant Yusuf, one of his officers came to him and said, "This man (meaning Abdur Rahman) does not show that he has designs against your government. He has only come to seek refuge and a living. You should offer him your daughter in marriage and give him some money. He will make no further demands. Send a delegation to him."<sup>2</sup>



The winter and bad weather intervened to delay the implementation of Sumail's strategy, and a sound strategy it was, of striking at the potential enemy before he gathered strength enough to pose a serious threat. In any case, they would need time to build up their forces. Meanwhile, reports were coming in of people everywhere turning to the Pretender and pledging him their support. Something would have to be done about this, something not affected by weather conditions or the availability of troops. Sumail resorted to diplomatic measures — trickery and guile — to take the wind out of Abdur Rahman's sails, at the very least to gain time for their preparations.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, pp 32-33; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 44; Akhbar Majmua: pp 78-79.

2. Akhbar Majmua: p 79; Dozy: p 180



Yusuf agreed to offer his daughter in marriage to the Umayyad Prince; agreed that the prince could settle in the territory of the *Jund* of Damascus (Elvira) or the *Jund* of Jordan (Rejio) or anywhere in between; that he could even rule and administer these two districts. As gifts to be immediately delivered he prepared two robes, two horses, two mules, two slaves and 500 dinars.<sup>1</sup> Yusuf also wrote a letter to Abdur Rahman in which he mentioned the excellent relations which had existed between the prince's ancestors and his own and warned him against two-faced advisers who would lead him astray and betray him. He offered him his loyal friendship, offered him also the hand of his daughter, and extended a warm welcome to the prince to stay with him in Spain.<sup>2</sup>

The gifts and the letter were sent with two envoys: Ubaid bin Ali and Khalid bin Zaid.<sup>3</sup> The former was a notable Muzarite chief, the latter a Spaniard whose father had been a Christian slave but had taken to Islam for which he had been freed by Yusuf. The son was a very intelligent and industrious boy and had been given a fine education under Yusuf's care. He had shown such excellent progress and become so well versed in Arabic literature and diction that Yusuf made him his secretary. He was a bright young man and would do most of the talking to Abdur Rahman and his companions. "Get to know how things are with him and which of the *junds* are with him," Yusuf said to the young Spanish Muslim. "Note everything you come to know about him and about those with him".<sup>4</sup>

The delegation arrived at Elvira. Khalid presented the gifts and the letter of the Governor. Abdur Rahman was wise enough not to rush into a decision without consulting those who knew more about the affairs of Spain. His advisers cautioned him against trusting Yusuf or accepting the marriage proposal which would create a relationship more favourable to the Governor than to the Pretender. They urged him to accept nothing less than Yusuf's surrender of power and an oath of loyalty to himself. "He is tricking you," they warned the prince. "He will not keep faith with you because his adviser and the man who actually runs his affairs is Sumail, and Sumail is not to be trusted."<sup>5</sup>

Abdur Rahman accepted the gifts but not the proposal of marriage with Yusuf's daughter. This angered the Spanish Khalid who remonstrated disrespectfully with the prince, for which he was put in irons and thrown into a cell.<sup>1</sup> The other envoy, Ubaid bin Ali, was sent back to Cordoba with the courtesy due to an ambassador, but Abdur Rahman sent no reply to Yusuf's letter, which left the dithering old governor even more puzzled. Meanwhile, Abdur Rahman's companions complimented him: "This is our first victory over the power of Yusuf."<sup>2</sup>

Abdur Rahman had thrown a challenge without being specific as to its form and force. He left it to the Governor to interpret his silence and react either with a peaceful submission or with an act of war. Yusuf, egged on by Sumail, chose war. The winter was at its height and no operations would be possible till the worst of it was over, but preparations could begin and were begun. Most of the Muzarites were with Yusuf and Sumail, only a few having gone over to Abdur Rahman; all the Syrians and Yamanites were for Abdur Rahman, the latter not because they loved Abdur Rahman but because they hated Yusuf and Sumail. Those who were still undecided would decide very soon.

The winter was not yet over when the government's preparations began for war against the challenger. It was now February 756. Orders were given for a concentration of troops at Secunda, on the south bank of the Guadalquivir opposite Cordoba. The objective given to the troops was the enemy at Elvira. The month of February had not ended when the forces began to move to the camp. Before long word of this military activity was carried to Abdur Rahman and the Umayyad chiefs. It was time for him also to move out to gather his forces for the struggle which lay ahead; time for him to meet his friends and ask them to stand up and be counted.



It had been over six months since the Pretender landed on the coast of Spain. During this period he had established contact with potential supporters in all clans and all *junds*, from most of whom

1. According to Akhbar Majmua (p 81) Khalid talked in a supercilious way to Ubaidullah and the old chief flung Yusuf's letter into his face and put the young man in chains.
2. Akhbar Majmua: p. 81.

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 45; Akhbar Majmua: p 79. According to the latter, the sum of money was 1000 dinars. An additional gift, for Badr, was a robe, a horse and 100 dinars.  
 2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, pp 45-46; Akhbar Majmua: pp 79-80.  
 3. The latter has also been referred to as Khalid bin Yazeed.  
 4. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 45.  
 5. *Ibid*: p 46.

he had received an encouraging response. The Umayyad military strength at Elvira had originally consisted of 300 horse, all from the division of Damascus, but over the months it had been augmented by groups from other districts, mainly Umayyad clients, which had brought the strength of the force up to 600. With this force of cavalry and accompanied by his chiefs, Abdur Rahman set out from Elvira in the early days of March.

He made his first stop at Archidona, which was the capital of the district of Rejio, the district of the division of Jordan. He went there because the chief of the Jordanians, Judar bin Amr, had invited him to come for the Eid, the day of Fitr, the first of Shawwal (March 8, 756). The prince and his entourage joined the Jordanians at the congregational prayer celebrating the conclusion of the month of fasting. At the end of the prayer, when it was time for the *khateeb* (prayer leader) to make an oration in the name of the ruler, the Jordanian chief called to him to repudiate Yusuf bin Abdur Rahman as governor of Spain and pronounce the sermon in the name of Abdur Rahman bin Muawia bin Hisham. "He is our Ameer and the son of our Ameer," Judar asserted.<sup>1</sup>

The *khateeb* did as he was told and after the sermon all present took the oath of allegiance to the Umayyad prince. A day or two later the prince's forces received an addition of 400 horsemen from the Berber tribe of Bani al Khali, resident in Ronda.

Abdur Rahman's move was now like a cavalcade, moving from place to place, receiving the welcome of the chiefs and the acclamation and prayers of well-wishers and recruiting more warriors to his cause from all factions and clans. The column went to Ronda, to Medina Sidonia, to Jerez, to Moron. As the force marched on it gathered bulk like a snowball until it arrived at the outskirts of Seville with a strength of 3000. It was now the end of Shawwal (early April).

Here Abdur Rahman received a delegation of the prominent citizens of Seville representing the immigrants and the *baladies*. It was headed by Abu Sabah Yahya bin Yahya, one of the most prominent Arab chiefs of Spain, and Hayat bin Mulamis, one of the leading chiefs of the *Gharb*, as the south-western part of Spain was called. As a result of the welcome at Seville, the people of the *Gharb* also, Arab and Berber, threw in their lot with the Umayyad prince.

Soon after his arrival at Seville, Abdur Rahman called a council of elders to plan the next move. Information had just been received that Yusuf and Sumail had set out from Cordoba and were marching to Seville. It was agreed at the council that the time had come to advance upon Cordoba and seize it. It was time for a showdown, time for a decisive battle.

1. Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 25.



## 12: THE BATTLE OF MUSARA

Yusuf was the first to initiate a move. Knowing that his attempt to draw the Pretender into an alliance had failed and that the Pretender was gathering strength as he neared Seville, he decided not to wait but to take Abdur Rahman before he became too strong to handle. Government forces were already depleted by desertions. A large number of soldiers had left Yusuf either because they were tired of campaigning or because they were reluctant to face the growing power of the Umayyad prince. The forces left with him were mainly from two clans, viz the Bani Fihri (his own clan) and the Bani Qais, whose chief was Sumail. With these clans he marched from Cordoba along the north bank of the Guadalquivir in the direction of Seville. Why he took the north bank when Seville was on the south (and east) bank is not clear. It was probably an act of caution: to have the river between himself and his enemy so that he would not be surprised, and also he would remain on the same side of the river as the capital. He made his first camp at Modover, 12 miles from Cordoba (now called Almodover del Rio).<sup>1</sup>

Upon hearing that Yusuf and Sumail had marched from Cordoba, Abdur Rahman set off from Seville along the south bank of the Guadalquivir. This happened at the very beginning of Zul Haj 138 Hijri (6-7 May 756). He had a motley force under command: Umayyads and their clients (practically all Syrians), the bulk of the Yamanites, some Muzarites, and a large contingent of Berbers from the south-west of Spain. The overall strength of his army is not known. At the end of a day's march the army stopped at Brenes in the district of Tocina.<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers had hardly pitched their tents when it occurred to them that Abdur Rahman did not have a standard. The standard was a symbol of the highest importance; it indicated the position of the commander in battle and confirmed his presence with the troops. Its loss was a matter of shame while its continuing flutter flaunted the army's defiance and will to victory. Abdur Rahman had no standard.

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 85. According to Ibn-ul-Qutya (p 26) Yusuf stopped at the Castle of Neeba, which cannot be located but was probably in the vicinity of Modover.

2. Ibn-ul-Qutya (p 26) calls the place Villanueva al Bahrain. Today there are three Villanuevas in the vicinity but all are north of the river.

"How can we go with a commander who does not have a standard?" the men said to one another. "There is no standard which can guide us to him in battle."<sup>1</sup>

The elders agreed with the popular sentiment: a standard was essential. Abu Sabah, chief of Seville and the overall head of the Yamanite faction with Abdur Rahman, produced a lance and a turban to make an improvised standard. As it happened, the lance was a long one and would have to be lowered in order to tie the turban at the top end, and the men thought that it would be inauspicious to lower it. This seems absurd because tall standards were always lowered to fix a flag on them, but perhaps in its present mood the army considered it important not to lower the staff but keep it upright at all times.

A place was found between two olive trees growing close together. The lance was held between the trees and an old client of the Umayyads, Abdullah bin Khalid by name, climbed one of the trees, crawled on to a branch and tied the turban to the tip of the lance. The choice of the man was a matter of great symbolic significance. His father had prepared the standard of Marwan, great-great-grand-father of the young Abdur Rahman, for the battle of Marj Rahit, of which more will be said presently. The standard was given to Abu Sulaiman Daud al Ansari who would henceforth carry it for the Umayyad ruler of Spain, as would his son after him.

The presence of this particular turban at the end of this particular lance as the standard of the Umayyads came to be regarded with such reverence by future generations that when the fabric of the turban decayed it was never discarded. A new turban was tied at the end of the lance with the old one underneath, and it was firmly believed that so long as this custom was observed the rule of the Umayyads would endure. This standard led the Umayyad Ameer to victory generation after generation. In course of time people came to believe in the legend of the sage Furqad of Saragosa, who was gifted with the power of divination. Furqad had passed this way, before the episode of the lance and turban, had looked at the two olive trees and said, "Between these two olive trees will be tied the banner of the prince against whom no standard will be raised but he will break it."<sup>2</sup>

The two armies marched on until they came upon each other,

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 33.

2. Ibid.

about half way between Seville and Cordoba, Yusuf and Sumail leading the government forces north of the river, Abdur Rahman leading his army south of it. The river was swollen by spring rains and had become a major obstacle giving protection to both sides. Here the two armies camped on their respective banks, in full view of each other, about 50 miles from Cordoba.

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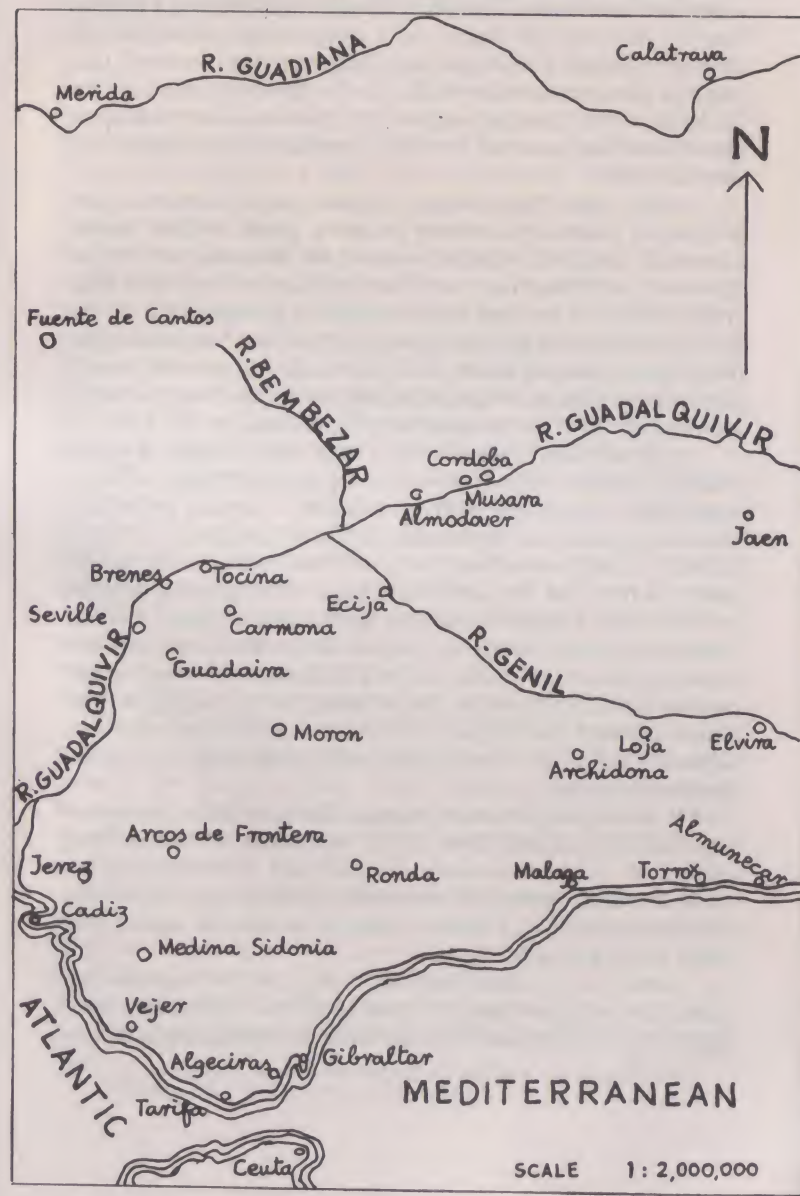
The famine had ended in Spain but its effects lingered. There was a scarcity of food in the country. This hit Abdur Rahman's troops harder than the government troops who were better provisioned because they were better organised. The prince was leading an army of hungry men who subsisted on whatever herbs and plants they could find by the roadside. They could not go on like this much longer. Abdur Rahman would have to bring the operation to an early conclusion before sheer hunger forced his soldiers to desert his cause.

He decided to make a dash for Cordoba and seize it before Yusuf could retrace his steps. He knew that the capital was almost denuded of troops and that there were Umayyad clients and Yamanite sympathisers among the inhabitants who would welcome his arrival. Moreover, Cordoba would provide food for his men. He devised a scheme to deceive his enemy and slip away from his camp without the enemy being any wiser about his plans. Shortly after dusk, leaving camp fires burning, he marched off stealthily in the direction of Cordoba.

But Sumail was not a man to be deceived by such simple tricks. The Pretender had hardly gone a mile when Sumail informed Yusuf of his move. Government forces were at once set in motion on the road to Cordoba, with the result that as the day dawned, the two armies saw each other marching in the same direction but on opposite sides of the broad river. Abdur Rahman stopped. The enemy had seen through his strategem.

This time, he thought, he would try speed rather than secrecy. He would march rapidly and openly and beat his opponent in the race. Again the two armies took the road to Cordoba, watching each other across the river, going neck and neck like two swift horses. After three days of this, with neither side gaining on the other, Yusuf's army had got to Musara, at a bend of the river a little short of Cordoba, while Abdur Rahman was directly opposite him. Again they stopped.

MAP 4: SOUTH CENTRAL SPAIN





Yusuf stopped at Musara because there was a ford here by which men and horses could cross the river and he did not wish to leave it uncovered. His posture was a defensive one: waiting for his adversary to make a move and remaining prepared to counter that move. A detachment which he sent to the Roman bridge over the Guadalquivir at Cordoba occupied the crossing site to make sure that Abdur Rahman would not dash across and take the capital in a surprise move.

There is no Musara today. At the site of what was then probably a sizeable town there is now a group of farm houses known as Cortijo do Casillas, next to the Alameda del Obispo (Grove of the Bishop) just two miles south-west of the present edge of Cordoba. At the present time the place is a garbage dump for the city of Cordoba with garbage thrown and burnt on both sides of the river. (It was smoking when this writer visited the site). The area is plain with no features of tactical significance except that, cradled in the bend of the river, it commands the crossing at the ford.

Another place believed to have been called Musara is within modern Cordoba itself. It is next to the ancient Church of Saint Asiselo just outside the old Gate of Seville — a place which now falls at the right side of the Avenida de Conde Vellallano, the broad boulevard which starts from the new Hotel Melia. It was at this place that Hurr, the first governor of Spain after the family of Musa bin Nusair (see Chapter I) built the first *musalla* in Spain.<sup>1</sup> But this was close to the wall of the city and would not have been the place chosen by Yusuf to confront Abdur Rahman. He would either position himself to cover the ford or occupy the city and fight from behind its battlements against which Abdur Rahman would be helpless. Yusuf chose to cover the crossing of the river, at the first-mentioned Musara.

It was evident to Abdur Rahman that he could not outmarch Yusuf and Sumail, and there was no more space for outmarching anyway. A quick reconnaissance established the existence of a strong Muzarite guard at the site of the Roman bridge, which ruled out any possibility of a surprise crossing to seize the capital. The prince could go no further.

It was now the 6th of Zul Haj (11 May) and his men were still picking herbs by the roadside to feed themselves. But here fortune appeared to take pity on the young pretender seeking a new destiny

1. The *Musalla* is a platform for prayer, not a proper mosque.

in Spain and sent him an unexpected gift, a small addition to his strength, a handful of Umayyad clients and Yamanites who slipped out of Cordoba to join him.

The two armies remained at this spot for three days, Yusuf's well-fed and contented, Abdur Rahman's hungry and getting hungrier. Sumail, the crafty old schemer, may have been amused at the deception attempted by an opponent less than half his age and thought he could teach a trick or two to the young upstart. But the young upstart was more cunning than the old fox knew. Two days after his arrival at this place he initiated talks with Yusuf. He wanted peace, he said; he would accept the proposals made by Yusuf when he was at Elvira and which he had turned down only because the Spaniard Khalid bin Zaid had not explained them clearly enough. The level of the river was falling. Could he and his men not cross over to Yusuf's side? It would be easier to conduct negotiations and implement the terms arrived at without the river separating the two leaders. Moreover, his men were hungry. Since they were going to be friends, Yusuf could feed them too.

The negotiations went on for two days, the second of which was the day of Arafa, the 9th of Zul Haj. Yusuf and Sumail were delighted, the Umayyad Prince was coming in peace, humbly seeking their goodwill. Men were not lacking among Yusuf's followers who wanted peace at any price, and soon word spread that there would be peace, that a settlement had been reached and a battle averted. Yusuf would let Abdur Rahman and his men cross the river and would entertain them at a great feast of Eid-ul-Azha: 10th Zul Haj, for which preparations were immediately begun.

It was on the morning of 9th Zul Haj that agreement was reached. The level of the river had fallen and a crossing was now possible. On the north bank of the Guadalquivir the soldiers of Yusuf and Sumail prepared to give a warm welcome to their fellow Muslims from across the river. On the south bank Abdur Rahman prepared for war.

"What day is this?" he asked his companions, as if he did not know. "It is Thursday, the day of Arafa," his friends replied. "Tomorrow is Friday, the day of Azha," said the Prince. "The contending forces are the Umayyads and the Fihrites, the Yamanites and the Qaisites. I hope this day will turn out to be a brother of the day of Marj Rahit, which it resembles in every way."<sup>1</sup>

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 52; Ibn-ul-Qutya pp 26-27



His words reminded his followers of the Battle of Marj Rahit, fought seventy-two years before, between the Umayyad Marwan and the Fihrite Zuhak bin Qais. That too was a Friday, and the day of Azha. Marwan had inflicted a crushing defeat on his Fihrite and Qaisite adversaries and seized the caliphal throne for himself. And that was what exactly the new Umayyad contender determined to do to the Fihrite Yusuf and the Qaisite Sumail. He believed the similarity to be ominous, and his belief was shared by his men.

Abdur Rahman organised his army for battle, appointed commanders of regiments and divisions, gave orders for the crossing. As the day wore on the passage of the river proceeded as planned without interference from opposing forces. Before the day had ended his regiments had crossed the Guadalquivir and assembled at a camp west of where his opponents were camped. Night fell, and Yusuf and Sumail had not the least suspicion of what was going on in the mind of the youthful pretender. Through the night, while the Bani Fihri and Bani Qais slept in peace and dreamed of a happy Eid-ul-Azha, Abdur Rahman continued secret preparations for the attack which he would launch in the morning.



It was the Eid-ul-Azha, Friday, Zul Haj 10, 138 Hijri (May 14, 756). On the government side the major activity of the morning was the happy hustle and bustle of preparing for a day of feasting to commemorate Prophet Abraham's proffered sacrifice of his son Ismail. It was joyful activity, doubly so because peace had been made between brethren of the faith and a bloody clash of arms averted. Yusuf and Sumail were congratulating themselves on the skill with which they had reduced the Pretender to a subordinate and harmless position. They had subdued and caged the young lion. Or so they thought.

The sun had just risen when the stark truth dawned upon them. Abdur Rahman to their front was not preparing his clans for a joint feast with government forces; he was arraying his regiments for battle. Yusuf and Sumail were shocked and horrified, as if struck by an unseen hand. The talks of peace over the past two days had been a ruse, a feint to lull them into a false sense of security while the Pretender prepared to launch a surprise attack. Yusuf and

Sumail had let him cross the river without the least hindrance, not even kept up their guard against possible treachery. And this from a stripling who, Sumail thought, had a lot to learn about stratagem and guile! He should have known better, for the Umayyads were masters of stratagem and guile.

With extreme haste they threw their regiments into battle formation to meet the attack, their backs to Cordoba. They got their men in position, only just — yet, too late. Abdur Rahman had achieved complete surprise with regard to intention and timing, catching the enemy unawares and creating a psychological impact of immense proportions. The Fihrites and Qaisites had not quite found their feet, not quite recovered their posture. Their intact front was only seemingly so; in their mental preparedness for battle there was confusion and uncertainty.

Abdur Rahman attacked with his centre and wings along the entire front. The battle was short and bloody. Government forces fought bitterly to hold their position but, suffering from confusion and the lack of a clear design, proved no match for their better organised opponents who fought with vigour and zeal to destroy a hated enemy. There was no dearth of courage on the government side, but the harder they resisted the more they suffered. Yusuf and Sumail lost a son each in the fighting, viz Abdullah and Jaushan, among thousands of Fihrites and Qaisites whose bodies littered the field of battle.

Before long Yusuf's right wing broke and was driven from the battlefield. Shortly after, his centre gave way. Only the left remained, consisting of the Bani Qais under the redoubtable Sumail. The old veteran was smarting from shame, not only of this military reverse but also of the personal indignity of being out-foxed by a young upstart fighting his first battle.

His own position was not lost. The Qaisites had maintained their ground, even though they had begun to lose heart. Sensing that a continued defensive posture would suit the enemy and refusing to concede victory, he urged his men forward and spurred his mule in the direction of Abdur Rahman, hoping to get to grips with him in personal combat. There was plenty of fight left in the old lion. Just then an elder of the Qaisites, Abu Ata, passed by him and shouted: "O father of Jaushan, save yourself! The coincidences are too many. The Umayyads are there and the Fihrites are there; the Yamanites are there and the Qaisites are there; it is the day of Azha. Everything is exactly as on the day of Marj



Rahit!"<sup>1</sup>

Sumail gave him a look of contempt and roared: "You have gone senile and your ideas too. Your reason is clouded with fear."<sup>2</sup>

The old fellow cast one terrified look at the Pretender's advancing host and galloped away to safety. Sumail on the other hand pressed on, still hoping to stem the tide and avert a shameful defeat. But it was not long before his men too recoiled and he found himself being carried back by a tide of retreating soldiers. By noon Abdur Rahman was in command of the battlefield while Yusuf and Sumail, with a large number of their surviving followers, were in full flight. Abdur Rahman had won his first victory in Spain, which was also the first battle in his life.

He surveyed the battlefield on a mule which had been his mount since this morning. He had started the day like a glamorous knight on a lively, prancing steed, just as a young Umayyad prince should. But the soldiers, who knew of the prince's utter lack of battle experience and the fact that this was the first time that he was going into action, began to wonder about his fast charger. "This youth of a few years is mounted on a swift horse," they said. "We can never be sure that he will not make off on his horse at the first reverse he suffers and leave us behind."

The matter came to the notice of Abdur Rahman. He at once decided to change his mount so that his men could see that there was no question of their commander trying to save himself by being better mounted than others. Next to him the old chief of Seville, Abu Sabah, sat astride an aged mule who was "almost white with age." Abdur Rahman addressed him: "This horse is restless under me. He will not let me aim my bow. Let me have your noble mule as my mount and take my spirited horse for yours."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the protests of the old chief who did not consider it seemly for a dashing young commander to be mounted on a mule in battle, Abdur Rahman exchanged mounts with him and made sure that he was seen by the troops mounted on the ancient mule. This was what we would now call a Public Relations stunt. And since it was only a matter of P.R. he changed back to his horse after the battle.

1. According to one source this statement was made by Ala bin Jabir (Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 47).
2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 52; Gayangos: vol 2, p 71.
3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 52; Akhbar Majmua : p 89; Gayangos: vol 2, p 70.

Sumail fled to Jaen, the district of his old division. Yusuf first took refuge in the hills north of Cordoba, then slipped away in the direction of Toledo. His son Abdullah was dead and another son, Abdur Rahman, was a prisoner in the hands of the Prince. The generals had lost the battle, but did not regard the war as lost. We will come back to them again.

Abdur Rahman's men pillaged Yusuf's camp with glee and sat down to eat a hearty meal which, ironically, had been cooked for them by Yusuf's chefs. Some Yamanites rushed to Cordoba and began to loot the town, even got to Yusuf's palace and maltreated the fallen governor's family. Luckily for them, Abdur Rahman arrived in time to stop the pillage and force the looters out of the palace and the town.<sup>1</sup>

Yusuf's wife came out of the palace to receive the new conqueror. "O cousin," she said, "Be good to us as Allah has been good to you." Abdur Rahman let it be known that he would be good to them. He called the official who was in charge of the mosque and put the ex-governor's wife and daughters in his charge, to be looked after with care and dignity. As a gesture of gratitude, one of Yusuf's daughters presented the prince with a slave girl named Hulal, who would become the mother of his son and successor, Hisham.

Abdur Rahman now installed himself in the palace, but there was a possibility of danger from the Yamanite band which had been driven out of the palace. The Yamanites had no love for the Umayyad Prince. So far as they were concerned the Umayyad Dynasty was as much Muzarite as the clans of Yusuf and Sumail. They had thrown in their lot with the Pretender not because they wanted him in but because they wanted Yusuf and Sumail out. They had now brought the hated government down and felt free to dispose of the Pretender as well. Abu Sabah, their crafty old chief and head of the Yamanite faction supporting Abdur Rahman, addressed his followers: "O people of the Yamen, are you up to two victories on the one day? We are rid of Yusuf and Sumail. Let us kill this youth, this son of Muawia, and power will be ours. We can then appoint over us one of ourselves and be finished with the Bani Muzar."<sup>2</sup>

1. There is disagreement about Abdur Rahman's entering Cordoba. According to one source he remained outside the palace for three days in order to let Yusuf's family pack up and go in peace (Maqqari: vol 3, p 34). According to others he went there immediately (Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 80; Akhbar Majmua: p 90). The last named version appears to be more accurate.
2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 34.



As it happened, not many responded to the old man's seditious invitation and the furore died down. Abdur Rahman was informed of the plot to kill him and took the precaution of keeping trusted guards around him for some time. When the plotters learned that they had been betrayed and Abdur Rahman knew of their plot, they abandoned the idea of eliminating him. As for Abu Sabah, the prince bided his time until an opportunity presented itself some years later; then he had the old fellow put to death.<sup>1</sup>

In Cordoba the entire population took the oath of allegiance to the new Ameer, Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, known later as Abdur Rahman the Immigrant. It was still the day of Azha in the year 138 Hijri (May 14, 756). He declared a general amnesty, saying to his loyal followers, "do not annihilate an enemy whose friendship can be useful to you."<sup>2</sup>

The Battle of Musara was a decisive battle. It decided the fate of Spain, altering the course of its history. What had hitherto been a disorderly, subordinate province would now become an independent state under an Ameer, the first of whom — the victor of Musara — would lay the foundations of a dynasty which would rule in glory for nearly three centuries.

Unfortunately, we have no details of this battle about the numbers of combatants involved, about the manoeuvres, about the moves and counter moves — beyond what has already been narrated. Even the figures of casualties are not known, except that they were very heavy on the government side and very light on the side of the Pretender. The pattern of battle appears to have been a simple frontal attack along the entire front which was sufficient to bring about the victory of the attackers. Abdur Rahman inflicted a clear defeat on the forces led by Yusuf and Sumail and drove them from the field with bloody slaughter.

The main factor which led to Abdur Rahman's victory was the stratagem which enabled him to attack an unsuspecting and unprepared foe. Some have called this an act of treachery, a perfidious trick, especially on the Eid-ul-Azha when brethren of Islam greet each other with love and goodwill as the culminating event of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Depending on the point of view, this could be so. The Umayyads were never known for any great ethical quality. But stratagem and guile are part of war and to

deceive an enemy as to the time, place and method of attack is perfectly legitimate. If the old simpleton, Yusuf, and the old fox, Sumail, who had themselves been no more ethical in their careers, let themselves be tricked by a novice, the credit goes to the novice.

Abdur Rahman had the cunning to outwit opponents famous for their cunning. He had the courage to go into battle without a superiority in numbers and the resolution and perseverance to fight on to victory. He was not yet 26, a youth fighting his first battle against the ablest general of Spain. And after victory he was generous enough to pardon his enemies and declare a general amnesty, and foresighted enough to think of all the inhabitants of the country as his subjects.

He would need all these qualities for what lay ahead. What lay ahead was continued strife, blood and toil. He had got Cordoba, but he had not yet got Spain. He had won the battle but he had not won peace. Cordoba was a milestone in his life, a landmark between his past as a fugitive running from pursuing enemies and a future as a rising conqueror pursuing enemies on the run. The roles had been reversed.

Forces would continue to rise against him, led by Arab and Berber chieftains, even Christians, to challenge his right to the throne. They would oppose him not because they themselves were better qualified to rule Spain but because they had been so conditioned by the anarchy and disorder stemming from tribalism and warlordism that they could not submit without being beaten into submission. Abdur Rahman would again have to take the field, and once again his enemies would be Yusuf and Sumail.

1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.* p 42.



### 13: THE END OF YUSUF AND SUMAIL

Yusuf made haste to retire with his beaten followers to Toledo. He arrived at the city to find that he still commanded a good deal of support from the Arabs of Spain, particularly from the Fihrites, of whom there was a sizeable element in Toledo. The governor of this province was a Fihrite, and he and his fellow clansmen went out of their way to help their troubled chief and make him feel better. Within days of his arrival at Toledo, Yusuf had shed his fatigue and depression and was ready to take the field again.

So was Sumail at Jaen. He and his Qaisite followers shared a determination to continue resistance to one whom they regarded as a usurper. The two leaders re-established contact and devised a plan to bring their enemy to battle under conditions favourable to themselves.

Yusuf marched with a Fihrite contingent to Jaen, where he joined the Qaisites of Sumail. Some days were spent here. Then the two generals, the same old team, set off from Jaen and made for Elvira in the south of Spain. At Elvira they recruited some local Arabs and began to prepare the town for battle. Their aim was to draw Abdur Rahman south, away from Cordoba, which would then be exposed and vulnerable. Meanwhile Yusuf instructed his son Abu Zaid, who commanded a small detachment from Merida, to remain concealed in the vicinity of Cordoba and capture the city as soon as he came to know of Abdur Rahman's departure from it.<sup>1</sup>

Abdur Rahman took the bait and swallowed it. His agents had kept him informed of the movements of the Fihrites and Qaisites in Toledo and Jaen and their advance to Elvira, but they had paid no attention to other forces which might pose a threat to the capital. As Yusuf and Sumail began to fortify Elvira, Abdur Rahman marched against them with almost his entire army. Cordoba was left with a very small detachment under Ubaidullah bin Usman, chief of the Umayyad clients who had laid the ground

work for the Prince's coming to Spain and welcomed him at Torrox. The garrison was strong enough to maintain law and order, but could do little more than that.

No sooner was the son of Yusuf informed that Abdur Rahman had marched away from the capital with the bulk of his army than he rushed to Cordoba and took it by surprise. Ubaidullah was able to save himself for a time, along with a few soldiers, by taking shelter in the mosque, but he was soon dislodged from this place and surrendered to Abu Zaid on terms. Cordoba was now in the hands of the son of Yusuf.

Abdur Rahman had gone half-way to Elvira when he received the news of the fall of Cordoba. It was shocking news indeed. He had lost his base; in fact for the present he had no base from which to operate against his enemies in the country. Furthermore, Cordoba was the political capital of the country and whoever held Cordoba ruled the land. He rapidly retraced his steps, determined to re-conquer Cordoba from the son of Yusuf.

Abu Zaid was not one of Yusuf's bravest sons and seems to have had no stomach for facing the new Ameer in battle. As soon as he heard of the approach of the Umayyad, he packed his bags, collected his hostages and fell back on Toledo. Abdur Rahman arrived to find Cordoba an open city.

The prince learned some good lessons from this exercise, the most important of which was that he must not under-estimate Yusuf and Sumail who still had plenty of tricks up their sleeves. They had neatly out-manoeuvred him and it was only his courage and will — and the lack thereof in the son of Yusuf — which enabled him to capture Cordoba a second time. He still had to deal with that crafty and resourceful pair. If he could not beat them he must pull out their fangs and render them harmless, perhaps even win them over to his side. With this design in mind he made once again for Elvira, this time leaving a strong garrison to defend the capital.

At Elvira he laid siege to the town. The siege wore on for a few weeks, during which there was no increase in the defenders strength, no more partisans came to their aid and their soldiers began to lose heart. Because of hasty and incomplete arrangements made for fortification and provisioning, Elvira was not in a position to hold out for long. Thus it is not surprising that Yusuf initiated parleys for peace. After some negotiations the terms of capitulation were agreed upon and a treaty drawn by Yusuf and Abdur

1. There is some doubt about this son of Yusuf. According to Dozy (p 193) his name was Abu Zaid. According to Akhbar Majmua (p 92) it was Abdur Rahman. But Abdur Rahman had been a prisoner since the Battle of Musara (Maqqari: vol 3, p 34). Hence this son is more likely to have been Abu Zaid.



Rahman.

According to the terms of this treaty, Yusuf and Sumail recognised Abdur Rahman as the new Ameer of Spain; the Ameer would issue a general amnesty under which all followers of the old governor would be safe from punitive action; the hostages taken by the son of Yusuf would be released; Yusuf and Sumail would remain in undisturbed possession of their property, most of which was in Cordoba, but were obliged to live in their houses at Cordoba and not leave the city. Yusuf's residence was the palace of Hurr (the first governor of Spain after the fall of the house of Musa bin Nusair) which was located in the eastern part of the town, while Sumail's house was in a suburb. Finally, as a guarantee of good behaviour, Yusuf would leave two of his sons in Abdur Rahman's keeping as hostages. These were Abdur Rahman (already in prison) and Muhammad, known also as Abul Aswad the Blind.

The treaty was signed in Safar 139 Hijri (July 757) just two months after the battle of Musara.<sup>1</sup> The two forces — the army of Abdur Rahman and the army of Yusuf and Sumail — marched back peacefully to Cordoba and Abdur Rahman rode into the city in triumph, with Yusuf on his right and Sumail on his left, proudly displaying his human trophies for the populace to see. It was a great moment for the young conqueror. The war with Yusuf and Sumail was over; or so the new Ameer thought.



For the next year or so, the latter half of 139 and the first half of 140 Hijri (ie 757), there was peace in the land. Abdur Rahman was acknowledged by all Muslims in Spain as Ameer, a word meaning commander or prince or independent ruler just below the rank of king. Abdur Rahman was king for all purposes, and in his case the word *Ameer* meant just that. But although Spain acknowledged his power, because he had defeated the previous government and was now master of the capital, he could not be sure of the loyalty of its inhabitants, particularly those dwelling in other major provinces: Merida in the west, Toledo in the centre, the Upper Frontier and still farther north. The opposition which he had faced in the past, apart from the forces in Cordoba, had come

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 34. Akhbar Majmua (p 93) puts the signing of the treaty a year later, in 140 Hijri (757-758). It could have been later than Safar (second month) of 139, but not later than early 140 Hijri.

from Merida and Toledo. This could happen again. Abdur Rahman did not venture into those provinces but preferred to remain in the capital, consolidating his grip on the throne and building up a strong base of support. A year of peace helped him do that.

Soon after his return from the siege of Elvira, Abdur Rahman sent out a general invitation to the Umayyads to come to Spain and start a new life with him. His emissaries went as far as Egypt and Syria and several distinguished members of the Umayyad clan accepted their kinsman's invitation and travelled to Spain. All were offered a warm welcome, treated with dignity and generosity, provided with means of subsistence, even given government office. Abdur Rahman was very proud of what he did in Spain for the house of Umayya. Later in life he would say: "Among the many favours bestowed on us by the Almighty, the greatest after making us masters of this kingdom, is His allowing us to collect in this country our kindred and relatives, and enabling us to give them a share in this kingdom, which we hold through his interference."<sup>1</sup>

Among those who joined him in Spain were his brother Waleed, two sons of Caliph Hisham (i.e. uncles of Abdur Rahman), his cousin Abdus Salam bin Yazeed and two nephews, viz Mugheera bin Waleed and Ubaidullah bin Aban. But the man who was to prove a tower of strength to the Ameer was his great-uncle, Abdul Malik bin Umar bin Merwan, a man of fiery spirit and indomitable courage who was also an experienced general and administrator. He came to the new Umayyad kingdom of Spain accompanied by ten other stalwarts from his family, and was received with the honour which he merited and appointed Governor of Seville. Abdur Rahman also appointed his son Umar as Governor of Moron. This happened in late 140 and 141 Hijri.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things to which this Abdul Malik turned his attention was the Friday prayers. It was customary for the sermon delivered after the congregational prayer, to be pronounced in the name of the ruler of the Islamic world, which meant the Caliph. As he had always done before, the Imam of the mosque dedicated his sermon to the Abbasid Caliph Mansur, who had ascended the caliphal throne exactly two years before Abdur Rahman conquered Cordoba. Abdul Malik was a diehard Umayyad with a burning

1. Gayangos: vol 2, p 76.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 58; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 264.



hatred for the Abbasids. He spoke to Abdur Rahman and asked that the name of Mansur be omitted from the Friday prayers.

The prince hesitated to take such a step. There was a certain religious unity in the Islamic world, whose symbolic head was the Caliph, and the prince was averse to taking any action which might not go down well with the faithful in Spain. But Abdul Malik kept up the pressure. He came back to the subject again and again, reminding the Ameer of all the injuries suffered by the Umayyads at the hands of the Abbasids. Finally, when he saw that his arguments were not having any effect and that Abdur Rahman was not inclining to his point of view, he gave his ultimatum: if the dedication of the sermon was not changed, he, Abdul Malik, would kill himself!

The loss of such a man as Abdul Malik was more than Abdur Rahman could afford. He agreed to the change. The Friday sermon would henceforth be delivered in the name not of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad but of the Umayyad Ameer of Spain. Abdur Rahman went a step further; he commanded that during the Friday sermon curses would be invoked upon the Abbasid Caliph.<sup>1</sup>

The boundaries of Muslim Spain had remained more or less as described in Chapter 8 and shown on Map 3. King Alfonso died in 757, the year after Abdur Rahman conquered Cordoba, and his son Fruela sat on the throne of Asturias. And there was trouble again in Andalusia, with the same old enemies whom he thought he had neutralised.



Yusuf fled Cordoba. This was a violation of the treaty which he had signed with Abdur Rahman at Elvira which required that he should remain always in the city. His flight was therefore a hostile act and was seen as such by Abdur Rahman.

For some time the pressure had been building up on Yusuf to do something. Within Cordoba there were strong elements opposed to the Umayyads and not reconciled to the establishment of their rule in Spain. Among these were groups of Fihrites and Hashimites — the latter being the clan to which the sub-clan of the Abbasids belonged — traditional foes of the Bani Umayya. These people felt that they had been let down by Yusuf's surrender at Elvira. Over

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 59; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 48.

the year of peace which had followed the treaty of Elvira they had made it clear to Yusuf that they did not approve of his action and urged him to take up arms against the Umayyad usurper with a view to re-establishing his own rule over Spain. Yusuf was reluctant to take such action. He was approaching 70 and he thought there would be nothing better than to be left in peace in his old age.

Another factor now came into play, another form of pressure began to push him against the wall. Yusuf was the owner of a good deal of property in Cordoba, the possession of some of which was disputed by his old tribal adversaries who in the past had suffered at his hands. They now claimed much of his property as their own, questioning the legality of his ownership. The case went to the magistrates, most of whom belonged to the hostile faction, and they gave a verdict against Yusuf. The ageing ex-governor saw the hand of Abdur Rahman in this. Having been disarmed politically, he was now being deprived even of his property and this was a breach of the treaty signed at Elvira. Yusuf lost his temper and uttered strong words against the Ameer, alleging that he was the cause of all his troubles. The matter came to the notice of Abdur Rahman and Yusuf came to know that it had come to the notice of Abdur Rahman. Fearing the wrath of the Ameer, he fled Cordoba. It was now late 141 Hijri (February - March 759).

Abdur Rahman sent a troop of horse after the fugitive but he eluded capture and made his way to Merida. Here he was warmly received by the citizens and discovered to his surprise that he commanded the loyal support of the large number of people. They flocked to him. Not many weeks had passed before he found himself at the head of an army of 20,000, composed of Berbers and Arabs, Fihrites and Qaisites, mainly *baladies* but even a few Syrians. It was a motley crowd, united only in opposition to the Umayyads. Yusuf regained his confidence and began to dream of once again ruling Spain from Cordoba. He marched from Merida in the direction of the capital.

This turn of events was a matter of serious alarm for Abdur Rahman. An army of 20,000 was a very large army, larger than any that he himself could muster. It was against just such a contingency that he had kept Yusuf confined in Cordoba, under a kind of house arrest, always under surveillance. But now Yusuf was out and again ready for battle. He could attack and capture Cordoba, and after the tricks that Abdur Rahman had played on Yusuf, the young



Ameer would get little mercy from him. The only support which he could expect was from his kinsman Abdul Malik at Seville, but he had no assurance that Abdul Malik would have the time he needed to raise a sufficiently strong force to counter Yusuf. Abdur Rahman was vulnerable.

He at once sent a message to Abdul Malik to prepare for action against the rebels, and himself assembled whatever troops were available to him in the capital. Then, with a hastily put together force, he set out from Cordoba and camped at Almodover, on the north bank of the Guadalquivir, 12 miles west of the capital. Even though he was himself in danger of being attacked and defeated in detail, even though his forces were split between Almodover and Seville, to the advantage of Yusuf, Abdur Rahman dared not to go to Seville because Cordoba would then be exposed and Yusuf could come and occupy it without firing a shot. So Abdur Rahman waited at Almodover, waited patiently for Yusuf to make the next move and the next mistake.

Meanwhile Abdul Malik gathered his forces at Seville and called upon his son at Moron to come to his aid. The son brought a contingent of loyal troops, but the combined forces of father and son assembled at Seville were much less in number than the 20,000 soldiers at the disposal of Yusuf.

Yusuf got to Laqunt, now Fuente de Cantos, halfway between Merida and Seville.<sup>1</sup> Here he was joined by a few more Arabs and Berbers which took his strength to over 20,000. From Laqunt he advanced along the bank of the Guadalquivir and camped at some point between Seville and Cordoba. His objective was still Cordoba, but here again he was assailed by his habitual irresolution, and this time Sumail was not there to tell him what to do.

Agents brought him word that Abdur Rahman was camped with a body of men at Almodover, a short distance to the east, while Abdul Malik and his son had gathered a considerable force of pro-Umayyad troops in Seville. Yusuf was placed between two hostile forces, as he saw it, and in danger of being attacked simultaneously from two sides. Had Sumail been present he would no doubt have advanced to attack and defeat Abdur Rahman and capture Cordoba. But Sumail was not present. Yusuf turned

1. This Laqunt should not be confused with Liqant, which is the Arabic name for Alicante. It is Dozy's opinion that Laqunt was probably Fuente de Cantos.

towards Seville, perhaps in the hope that after he had crushed Abdul Malik it would be easier to tackle Abdur Rahman, perhaps because in case of a reverse he would be able to withdraw more easily to the west, to the province of Merida, where Umayyad support was weak. It was now about mid-142 Hijri (September-October 759).

A bloody battle was fought outside Seville in which the bolder leadership of Abdul Malik and the better cohesion of his army enabled him to overcome the disadvantage of numbers. Yusuf's army was soundly thrashed. A large number of his followers were slain and the rest scattered. The battle was won by the Ameer without moving out of his camp at Almodover, thanks to the intrepid Abdul Malik.

For Yusuf this would be his last battle and the last time that he would see the disintegration of his army. The old man fled northwards, passed through Calatrava,<sup>1</sup> and picked his weary way to Toledo where he still hoped to find sympathy, if not active support. By his side rode two companions, one a Persian client and the other a slave.

Ten miles from Toledo he passed by a group of men. One of them, a Madinese by the name of Abdullah bin Amr, turned to his companions and said, "This is the Fihrite, on the run. The country has turned against him. To kill him would mean salvation for him and salvation from him."<sup>2</sup> They followed the fugitive general.

While Yusuf was passing through a village four miles short of Toledo, the assassin caught up with him. He killed Yusuf and the Persian client but the slave survived the attack and made good his escape. Abdullah bin Amr then cut off Yusuf's head and took it to Cordoba to present it as a gift to the new Ameer. Thus ended, in Rajab 142 Hijri (November 759) the life and unhappy career of the aged Yusuf bin Abdur Rahman. He was a great-great-grandson of the illustrious Uqba bin Nafe who conquered the Maghreb and rode his horse into the Atlantic eighty years before.

When Abdur Rahman learned that the head of his old adversary was on its way to the capital, he indulged in an act of sheer vindictiveness. He had the son of Yusuf, the hostage Abdur Rahman, executed in prison. Then the heads of the father and son were impaled on lances and put in front of the palace of Cordoba for all to see.

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1. Arabic: Qalat Rabah, near the present Ciudad Real.  
2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 35; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 49.



The end of Sumail was also near. He remained to the last the proud Arab chieftain bowing his head before no man. When Yusuf fled, Abdur Rahman had sent for Sumail, knowing that Yusuf hardly moved without Sumail's advice and encouragement, and asked him where Yusuf had gone.

"I know nothing," replied Sumail, perhaps truthfully.

"He could not have left without telling you," the prince insisted. "Moreover, your son went with him. I hold you responsible for his return."

At this the haughty old general exploded: "If he were hiding under my foot, I would not raise it off him for you. Do what you will."<sup>1</sup>

Abdur Rahman had him thrown into prison where he was joined by the two hostage sons of Yusuf — Abdur Rahman and Muhammad alias Abul Aswad the Blind. (he was not actually blind but pretended to be so in order to have a better chance of escaping from prison). Old Sumail accepted his incarceration with stoic resignation, but the sons of Yusuf were impatient to join their father who was out there mustering forces to oust the Umayyad and restore their family's power. They waited for a chance to escape.

The chance came. The prisoners had been taken to the river bank for their ablutions, which was a daily routine, and the two brothers took advantage of a moment of neglect on the part of the guards and made a bid for liberty. Abul Aswad was helped by a slave and was able to acquire a horse on which he effected his escape and rode to Toledo, where he was warmly received by his friends and kinsmen. Abdur Rahman bin Yusuf, however, was a corpulent fellow, neither very fast nor very fit. He lost his breath and was recaptured and brought back to prison.<sup>2</sup>

So the months passed until Yusuf's abortive attempt to overthrow the Umayyads, his flight and death at the outskirts of Toledo. As his head was brought to Cordoba his fat son's life also came to an end, so that Abdur Rahman could have the satisfaction of seeing the heads of father and son stuck on lances and displayed in front of the palace.

Then it was Sumail's turn. His career too had run its course. He had known of the attempt which the sons of Yusuf would make

to escape from captivity but had refused to participate in it. He had disdained flight and remained in prison.

One morning, soon after the death of Yusuf, the elders of the Bani Qais were led into Sumail's cell to see his lifeless form stretched out on his bed. Beside the bed, on a table, stood a pitcher of wine, a cup and a plateful of dried fruit usually taken with drinks. Abdur Rahman hoped that they would believe that Sumail had drunk himself to death.

The elders were not fooled. They knew of their man's drinking habits, but they did not believe that this was the cause of his death. They wanted their departed chieftain to know, even if he could not hear them, that they knew the truth. "By Allah, O father of Jaushan", they addressed the corpse, "you did not drink the wine. You were poisoned."

They were wrong in believing that their chief had been poisoned. He had not been poisoned. He had been strangled during the night on the orders of Abdur Rahman.<sup>1</sup>

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 35.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 35; Ibn Izari : vol 2, p 50.

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 5, p 186; Maqqari: vol 3, p 36.



#### 14: ABDUR RAHMAN AND THE CALIPH

Little is known about the measures taken by Abdur Rahman during the following year or two to organise and administer the realm as its new Ameer. Historians are silent on the point. Information as to whom he appointed as governors and administrators of provinces and districts is vague and uncertain. He was master of Cordoba, but his grip was shaky and his actual rule probably did not extend beyond the province of Andalusia, perhaps not even over the entire province.

Within the capital he organised the administration as best as he could. He appointed Tamam bin Alqama — the first Muslim of Spain to greet him on the coast of North Africa and from whose name he had drawn a favourable omen — as his *hajib*. This appointment was later to be equated with prime minister, but for the present it was no more than a chamberlain or *major domo* who saw to various arrangements of the palace. Ubaidullah bin Usman and his son-in-law Abdullah bin Khalid — the two men instrumental in inviting him to Spain — were both appointed *viziers* (ministers) and *katibs* (secretaries). Abdur Rahman did not use the vizier as a minister to deal with affairs of state because he did everything himself. His viziers were counsellors and assistants to be used as required.<sup>1</sup> He kept his faithful freedman Badr always at his side to use as commander of expeditions against various rebels who raised their unruly heads.

With the killing of Yusuf and the assassination of Sumail, his two most dangerous adversaries had been eliminated and no other seemed to remain as threats to his position. That this was an illusion would soon become apparent. The unscrupulous methods which he had employed and the energy and resolution with which he pursued his aims, while earning him the respect and admiration of others, also aroused mistrust. He had blood on his hands. The bright image of the young romantic prince winning his crown had already begun to fade.

The brutality with which he treated Yusuf and Sumail, the calculated vengeance with which he flaunted the severed heads of Yusuf and his son, the cold-blooded murder of Sumail, while intended to frighten would-be rebels into submission and dis-

courage further attempts to overthrow him, actually produced opposite results. Arab and Berber chiefs were not faint-hearted puppets. They had been fighting for too long, against the Christians and among themselves, to be cowed by such measures. The very vindictiveness of the prince and the heartless treatment meted out by him to his enemies stiffened resistance and led to more violence.

The opposition was to come from mainly three sources: (a) the Fihrites, who had not reconciled themselves to loss of power and prestige and thirsted for vengeance; (b) the Yamanites, who had hoped to use Abdur Rahman to seize power for themselves or at least to share it with him but now realised that they themselves had been used; and (c) the Berbers, who still smarted from what they regarded as step-brotherly treatment by the Arabs. The prince's own actions were one of the principal causes of the strife that was to follow and the blood that was to flow. He was not destined to find peace, not for long. The peace which had been won with the blood of Yusuf and Sumail would last only for a year and a few months.



The first rebellion was that of Rizq bin Noman of the tribe of Ghassan. Rizq was chief of the Arabs of Algeciras and had been a close friend of Yusuf. At the end of 143 Hijri (early 761) he raised the standard of revolt at Algeciras, and having declared his opposition to the new Ameer, marched to Medina Sidonia and occupied it. Following this he advanced to Seville which, because of his unexpected arrival and the absence of any large body of troops in the city, was not able to put up more than a token resistance. This city too was captured by Rizq.

Abdur Rahman marched to Seville to deal with the rebel. His army consisted in the main of Umayyad clients and Syrian sympathisers with the addition of some Yamanites, Qaisites and Berber clans which had remained loyal to him. The strength of the opposing forces is not known, but a hard battle was fought outside Seville at which the rebel chief was killed and heavy losses suffered by his followers. Abdur Rahman entered the city as victor, and after a brief stay at Seville returned to Cordoba.



1. Maqqari: vol 3, pp 45-46; Gayangos: vol 2, pp 91 - 92



Hardly had a year passed after the insurrection of Rizq when there was trouble in Toledo. The governor of this city and the province, since the time of Yusuf, was the Fihrite Hisham, son of Uzra bin Abdullah who had become governor of Spain for a short time upon the death of Anbasa bin Suhaim 40 years before.<sup>1</sup> Toledo had always been a Fihrite stronghold where defeated Fihrites sought sanctuary time and again. Thus it was meet that it should be the focus of the first major rebellion against the Umayyad ruler.

At the beginning of 145 Hijri (about second quarter of 762) Hisham renounced his allegiance to the Ameer. With him as his principal lieutenants were two prominent Arabs, viz Hayat bin Waleed and Al Amri, the latter having the distinction of being a great-grandson of Umar bin al Khattab, the second Caliph of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Although his strength was not very great, or perhaps because of it, Hisham prepared Toledo for a siege.

Toledo was a provincial capital of the highest importance, apart from being a town of historical significance. It had once been the "Toletum" of the Romans, a small fortified town captured by them two centuries before Christ, and had become the national capital of the Visigothic Kingdom of Spain in the middle of the 6th Century. Being located almost exactly in the geographical centre of the peninsula, it was the ideal place from which to control or influence events of nation-wide significance. No ruler who hoped to rule all Spain could afford to let Toledo slip from his grasp.<sup>3</sup>

Abdur Rahman marched against Hisham and upon arrival at Toledo laid siege to the city, which was the best that he could do for Toledo was practically unassailable. Sitting on a rugged promontory of granite, it was protected on three sides by the deep gorge of the fast-flowing River Tagus. The river approached the town at its north-eastern edge, flowed down its eastern side, turned round along the south and went up the western side of the town before

flowing away in a westerly direction. Toledo was cradled by a curve of the Tagus, with a range of green wooded hills rising on the southern side of the curve. The gorge had precipitous sides, 500 feet high which, though not impossible to climb, made an assault extremely difficult, with the result that it could be attacked only from the north. The town and the citadel stood on a high rock overlooking the eastern arm of the gorge.

As the siege wore on, week after week, conditions inside the city went from bad to worse. Finally, the rebel commander sued for peace. The terms were agreed upon: the siege would be lifted but the Ameer's troops would not enter the city; Hisham would acknowledge Abdur Rahman as ruler and overlord; Hisham would be left as governor at Toledo, but as a guarantee of good behavior would give his son as hostage to the prince. With this hostage in tow, Abdur Rahman marched back to Cordoba, in about the second quarter of 145 Hijri (Summer of 762). Hardly had he arrived at the capital when Hisham once again raised the standard of revolt and began to incite the inhabitants of the north against Cordoba.

Abdur Rahman had other matters to occupy him and it was not till a year later, the second quarter of 146 Hijri (Summer of 763) that he was able to set out to deal with the faithless rebel of Toledo. For the second time he laid siege to the city and called upon Hisham to surrender. Hisham rejected the call, whereupon Abdur Rahman had his son beheaded and his head flung into the city by means of a catapult.<sup>1</sup> This was quite fair. Since the son was given by the father as a guarantee of his own loyal behaviour, he could expect him to remain alive only so long as the father remained loyal. In this case the death of the man was not an act of cruelty on the part of Abdur Rahman but the result of the faithlessness of his father.

Abdur Rahman would have continued the siege, in fact tightened his hold on Toledo, but for a greater danger which appeared in the south-west of Spain. An Arab general, acting as an agent of the Abbasid Caliph at Baghdad, was raising the people of Spain against their Umayyad ruler. Abdur Rahman abandoned the siege and hastened back to Cordoba.

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1. Akhbar Majmua: p 101

1 We have one report, from Ibn-ul-Qutya (p 30), that Abdur Rahman appointed a descendant of Sad bin Ubaida (a distinguished companion of Prophet Muhammad) as governor of Toledo. This man is not mentioned by any other historian. If the report is true, and it is probably not true, he must have been a totally ineffective governor. He does not appear again in history.

2. Ibn Izari (vol 2; p 53) gives Al Amri's name as Hisham bin Hamza bin Abdullah bin Umar.

3. For an account of the conquest of Toledo by the Muslims, see this writer's "The Muslim Conquest of Spain".



Caliph Abu Jafar al Mansur reigned at Baghdad and ruled the entire world of Islam but for Spain. North Africa had repudiated the Abbasid Caliph when the Viceroy, Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, had differences with him (see Chapter 9), but he had later returned to the fold and North Africa had again become part of the Caliph's domain. Now only Spain remained, and Spain was not only outside the realm of the Caliph but actively hostile to Baghdad. It was a thorn in the Caliph's side.

What made the thorn more painful was the fact that Spain was ruled by an Umayyad, a survivor of the dynasty hated by the Abbasids, a dynasty which the Abbasids had moved heaven and earth to exterminate. Mansur rued the day when the young prince escaped the clutches of Abbasid troops on the bank of the Euphrates and thereafter continued to evade capture by the pursuers who hunted him day and night. Abdur Rahman had more or less disappeared from the world until he suddenly surfaced in Andalusia and won a resounding victory at Musara. His consolidation of power continued to hurt, but the most cruel blow suffered by the Caliph was the rejection of his name in the Friday prayers at Cordoba.

Mansur followed with interest the fortunes of the young Ameer. He was heartened by the hazards which the Umayyad faced, the obstacles which impeded his march to success. He knew very well that those who supported the Umayyads were a minority in Spain; knew of the disaffection of the Fihrites and Qaisites, and the readiness of the Berbers to embrace any cause which would hurt an Arab ruler. He was well informed of the affairs of Spain, and what he knew encouraged him in the belief that if a serious attempt were made to dislodge the Umayyad Prince and re-establish Abbasid rule over the country, it would meet with success. All he needed was the right man to do the job.

He found his man in Ala bin Mughees al Yahsubi of the large Yamanite tribe of Juzam. Ala was a distinguished chief and general in the south-west of Spain who had his residence at Beja (now in Portugal) but would often travel to North Africa. It was while he was visiting North Africa that Mansur established contact with him and sent him a letter of credentials appointing him governor of Spain. He also sent him a black Abbasid flag to hoist at Cordoba and provided him with a considerable sum of money to meet the expenses of a war against Abdur Rahman. He even offered to put troops from North Africa under his command, but Ala was

confident that he could do the job without them.

It was some time after the middle of 146 Hijri (autumn of 763) that Ala returned to Beja and unfolded the Abbasid flag. He denounced Abdur Rahman as a usurper and called upon the Muslims of Spain to return to the allegiance of the true Caliph at Baghdad and join him in driving the Umayyad Prince from the throne. He was successful beyond his expectations. The multitudes responded enthusiastically to his call: Arabs and Berbers, immigrants and *Baladies*, especially the Jund of Egypt settled in Beja. The bulk of the Fihrites and Yamanites opted for Ala. As he marched towards Cordoba, stopping for a while at Laqunt (Fuente de Cantos) the ranks of his followers swelled. He marched on to Almodover on the north bank of the Guadalquivir, 12 miles west of Cordoba. The entire south-western part of Spain was now in his hands. He was poised for a powerful assault on Cordoba and had no doubt in his mind that the days of Abdur Rahman were numbered.

Abdur Rahman had just beheaded the hostage son of the rebel governor of Toledo when he received the alarming news of what was going on at Beja. These reports were followed by others no less alarming about the response to the rebel general's call from the people of south-western Spain. Almost every major tribal faction seemed to have gone over to him. Abdur Rahman sent a fast messenger to Cordoba, instructing Badr to muster every man fit for battle and go forward to engage the forces of Ala. Badr was told to prepare to fight a do or die battle.

The course which this operation followed is not clear and the details available are sketchy. As Abdur Rahman returned to Cordoba, Badr clashed with Ala. There were several engagements between him and the Abbasid general in each one of which the Umayyad freedman was worsted. Had Ala's army been less unwieldy and better organised, it would have had even greater success against the smaller but more closely knit detachment of Badr. During the course of these operations, Ala had crossed the Guadalquivir and begun to operate south of the river. Abdur Rahman himself came into action with a small group of faithful followers but the result of the clash was an unhappy one for the prince who found himself being driven westwards by the forces of Ala. Finally, he was shut up in the Castle of Carmona, 20 miles east of Seville, and closely invested.

Carmona was built for defence, by nature's design and by the



skill of the military engineer — an almost impregnable fortress. It was said that there was no stronger position in Spain and none more difficult for a besieging force to capture.<sup>1</sup> It stood upon a ridge which rose above the plain, its slopes getting steeper near the top and at places capped by an escarpment.<sup>2</sup>

Badr was still somewhere in the field but whatever he could do against the besieging force was little more than pinpricks. The prince and his soldiers were safe in the castle, but they were also prisoners in the castle. There was no hope of a rescue. The Umayyad rule in Spain which had started gloriously on the bloody battlefield of Musara was about to end ingloriously on another battlefield. Abdur Rahman, however, was not the man to give up, even when there was no deliverance in sight.

Two months passed. It would now be about the middle of 147 Hijri (autumn of 764). Abdur Rahman and his men had survived with their spirits hardened by their sufferings. The prince had only 700 men, but everyone of them was a fine warrior and as a group they were probably the best and bravest regiment of Muslim Spain. This period of two months did no serious harm to the Umayyad, but it played havoc with the army of Ala bin Mughees.

His army was a horde, a disparate assembly of tribes and clans with no shared goal and no motivation other than a thirst for adventure and loot. The Abbasid cause meant nothing to them. The main purpose of most of them was plunder, and in the months which had elapsed since Ala raised his black standard at Beja, they had plundered the countryside unmercifully. The two months of relative inaction which had just passed caused more damage to the division of Ala than to the regiment of Abdur Rahman. The dullness of siege is distasteful to the volatile temperament of Arabs and Berbers, and large numbers of them had drifted away. Those who remained were scattered without order or discipline over the plain surrounding Carmona, and many were even now preparing to saddle their horses and ride away. It was a most disorderly army which besieged the Umayyads in the Castle of Carmona.

Abdur Rahman knew all this. He determined to make one last desperate bid for freedom. He sent word to Badr about what he planned to do and instructed him about the action that he had to

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 269.
2. In the ruins of the old Castle of Carmona the Spanish government has now built a beautiful *Parador Nacional* (State Inn) which offers a magnificent view of the plain to the east.

take. Then, early one night, soon after dusk, he got all his men together, had a bonfire lit in the courtyard of the castle. Here he drew his sword, unbuckled his scabbard and threw the scabbard into the fire.

"Come with me against this horde," he called to his warriors. "Come as those who do not care to return."<sup>1</sup>

Not a man wavered. Every single one of the 700 flung his scabbard into the fire and stood sword in hand to follow his leader in the bold venture which would end in victory or death. At the time chosen by the prince, they rushed out of the castle and fell upon the unsuspecting rebels, even as Badr attacked the camp from an other direction.

Surprise was complete. The shock of the attack paralysed the rebels. Some of them took up arms to fight back but most of them were in too disorganised a state to even defend themselves. Confusion turned to chaos, and this in turn led to panic as screaming bands of Umayyad warriors plunged deeper into the camp, leaving a bloody trail of dead and dying in their wake. Before the sun had risen, the mass of Ala's army had scattered and fled. 700 of them lay dead on the battlefield, and this included the leader who had been the Abbasid governor - designate of Spain.<sup>2</sup>

This was Abdur Rahman's finest hour. He had crushed an enemy force many times more numerous than his own. He had thwarted a powerful Abbasid attempt to unseat him, an attempt which almost succeeded and which would have succeeded had there been a lesser man than Abdur Rahman as its target. But in his finest hour Abdur Rahman could not resist the temptation to add insult to the Caliph's injury.

He had the heads of Ala and his principal officers preserved in salt and camphor. Each man's name was written on a label which was affixed to his ear so that each could be indentified and known. Most of the heads were sent with travelling merchants to Qairowan, the Abbasid capital of North Africa, where they were flung in the market-place so that the people would know what befell those who dared to act as agents of the Abbasid Caliph against the Umayyad Ameer. The people of Qairowan got the point.

One head, that of the ill-starred Ala bin Mughees, was wrapped in the black flag which had been sent to him by the Caliph.

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 51.
2. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 266; Maqqari: vol 1, p 332; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 52.



It was then put in a basket along with the Caliph's letter appointing him governor of Spain. This basket was entrusted to a trader going to Mecca with instructions to deposit it in front of the Caliph's tent during the Haj, the annual pilgrimage undertaken in the month of Zul Haj. This year, i.e. 147 Hijri, Haj fell in February 765.

Caliph Mansur was present in Mecca for the Haj. He awoke one morning to see his guards placing before him a basket which on examination was found to contain the head of Ala, the Abbasid flag and the Caliph's letter of appointment. The Caliph was aghast. His first reaction was of sorrow. "We sent this poor fellow to his death," he said. Then the full import of the tragedy and of Abdur Rahman's audacious gesture dawned upon him. He was shaken. "Thanks be to Allah," he exclaimed, "who has placed an ocean between us and that devil."<sup>1</sup>



Having disposed of the heads of Ala and his generals, and in doing so taught the Abbasid Caliph a lesson which he would not forget, Abdur Rahman turned his attention once again to Toledo. He had left it a year before, raising the siege of the city in order to deal with the greater peril of the Abbasid plot. The year had been a period of rest for Toledo's rebel governor, Hisham bin Uzra, and his chief lieutenants, Hayat bin Waleed and Al Amri. Had Abdur Rahman been defeated at Carmona they would have been regarded as heroes, but unfortunately for them Abdur Rahman won and their luck ran out.

His victory at Carmona had gained the Umayyad prince prestige beyond measure. Now more people were willing to follow him. He did not trust Arabs any longer, having seen enough of what he regarded as their fickleness, but he did his best to exploit the change of public opinion in his favour. If that change of heart were to be made to last, he would have to stamp out the rebellion at Toledo before others got infected with seditious ideas. Consequently, after a brief rest at Cordoba, he despatched a strong force under Badr and Tamam bin Alqama to deal with Toledo.

It was at this time that Abdur Rahman made his first major change in the military organisation of Spain. The past practice had been that in every district where Arabs were settled, they were

required to prepare a given number of able-bodied men for military service during the summer campaigning season. Abdur Rahman changed this system. He instituted a new system whereby every district would provide half its able-bodied manpower for six months and the other half in the following six months. In this manner he would have a sufficient number of soldiers always available for military duty.<sup>1</sup>

Once again Toledo was under siege. All access and exit were blocked. No one could get out; no provisions could come into the town. The inhabitants of Toledo had little interest in the clannish bickerings of the leading families of Arabs which was the underlying cause of the rebellion. Moreover, Abdur Rahman's brilliant victory at Carmona had left no doubt in their minds about the fate which awaited those who took up arms against him. After a few weeks of being shut up in their unassailable fortress, they came to the conclusion that the doubtful benefits of their revolt were not worth the distress which was their lot in the present. Then Badr and Tamam got in touch with the inhabitants and began to work on them, to turn them against their leaders. Before long it was agreed by the people of the city that they would hand over the three chiefs to the Umayyads in return for amnesty and a lifting of the siege.

And this was what they did. We do not know if the citizens had to fight to subdue their leaders; probably not. The loyalty of the Arabs of Toledo was no more stable than elsewhere in Spain and it appears that the leaders were completely abandoned by the people who till a few weeks before had been their loyal followers. The siege was over. Operations ceased and the troops of the Ameer entered the city in peace. Hisham, Hayat and Al Amri were prisoners in the hands of Badr and Tamam. It was now the end of 764 (nearing the end of 147 Hijri).

Badr stayed on in Toledo where he would await the orders of his master. Tamam took a small escort and set off for Cordoba to present the three distinguished prisoners to the prince. During the journey, at a place called Aureet, he was met by an official carrying Abdur Rahman's order: Tamam would return to Toledo and take charge as Governor; Badr would return to the Ameer; the official would escort the prisoners to Cordoba.

When the prisoners arrived at Halza,<sup>2</sup> a short distance from

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 332; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 52.

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 104.

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 53; Akhbar Majmua (p 104) gives the name of this place as Halwa.



Cordoba, they were received by Abdur Rahman's chief of police and a few tradesmen who would do what they had been told to do. A barber shaved the prisoner's heads and beard; a tailor stitched a simple woollen tunic for each of them; a basket-maker made three panniers which would be loaded on three asses. The prisoners, dressed in their woollen tunics, were put in the panniers and the panniers fastened on the asses. Then the party headed for Cordoba.

The people of Cordoba saw an amazing sight: three asses advancing abreast into the city with panniers on their backs while from a hole in each pannier protruded the shaved head of a noble and once powerful Arab. Al Amri, who was the weakest of the three, turned to Hayat and lamented, "They have put me in a very tight tunic." Hayat replied, "You will be lucky if they leave you to wear it out".<sup>1</sup>

Many cheered, many laughed at the ridiculous sight of the comical faces protruding from the panniers on the backs of the asses. Some turned thoughtful. The asses were led through the town for all to see, to be impressed, to be warned. All would know the punishment inflicted upon those who rose against the Ameer, know that the Ameer never forgave.

When the laughing and cheering was over, when Abdur Rahman felt satisfied that enough indignity had been heaped upon them, the three wretched captives were taken out of their panniers. Then, on the orders of Abdur Rahman, they were executed and their bodies crucified.

2. Akhbar Majmua: pp 104 - 105.

## 15: WAR WITH THE YAMANITES

When Abdur Rahman did what he did to the head of Ala bin Mughees (preserving it in salt and camphor and sending it to Mecca) his intention was to deliver a slap in the face of the Caliph at Baghdad. But he succeeded in doing more than add insult to the Caliph's injury. He added insult also to the injury of the Yamanites who were the majority faction in the Arab population of Spain.

Ala was a Yamanite, and a notable chief of the Yamanites in the country. He was from the tribe of Juzam and the clan of Yahsub — the most distinguished Yamanite clan in Spain which had produced a large number of prominent Arab leaders. Had Abdur Rahman made an attempt to conciliate the Yamanites after the Battle of Carmona, instead of twisting the knife in their wounds, he might have won peace for himself and the country. But he never made the attempt, and his actions further antagonised the Yamanite faction. This resulted in a wave of revolts which lasted for eight years, each of which was led by a chief who was a Yamanite, a Juzamite and a Yahsubite, and most of whom were related to each other in bonds of kinship. The prince had hardly a year's respite after the fall of Toledo before the first of the Bani Yahsub chiefs rose against him.

This was Saeed, alias Al Matari, the chief of Niebla. His challenge was not the result of a deliberate, calculated bid for power but the effect of a lively bout of drinking. One night, at the beginning of 149 Hijri (early 766) he got very drunk and in a state of inebriation began to tell his drinking companions about the fellow Yamanites who had been killed beside Ala at Carmona. The more he talked about the tragedy which befell his kinsfolk the more agitated he became. Finally, he got so worked up that he fastened a flag to his lance, as a standard for battle, and swore to take revenge.

In the morning, when he woke up and came to his senses, he had no recollection whatever of the events of the night before. He gazed incomprehendingly at the standard. He asked his friends what the flag was doing at the end of his lance. They told him. His first reaction was of horror: if the Ameer came to know about this he would never spare him. He told his men to hurry up and take the offending flag off the lance, but before they could do so he stopped



them. The spirit of the chivalrous Arab prevailed; unfastening a banner was like throwing a challenge and then withdrawing in fear. "I have never prepared flag for war," boasted Matari, "and unfastened it without battle."<sup>1</sup>

He called his men to arms. The Yamanites flocked to him in considerable numbers and a sizeable force of Berbers also gathered under his standard. With his newly formed army he marched to Seville which he seized without opposition. He was welcomed by a large element of the local population of the city, which resulted in a further augmentation of his fighting strength. Then he heard that Abdur Rahman was marching against him with a large army.

Matari was a brave man but an indifferent general, certainly not the kind of leader who would inspire confidence among the troops. He decided to avoid open battle with the Umayyads. Six miles south-east of Seville rose the castle of Guadaira, and Matari slipped into this castle with a small detachment. The date of this move has been given as Rabi-ul-Awwal II, 149 Hijri (April 26, 766). Abdur Rahman arrived on the scene and laid siege to Guadaira.<sup>2</sup>

It was a tight siege. Matari had made no advance preparations for provisioning the castle and in an attempt to force the Ameer to raise the siege, he sent an urgent plea for help to the chief of Medina Sidonia, Ghias bin Alqama of the Bani Lakhm, also a Yamanite, who was a friend and sympathiser. Ghias responded gallantly to the call of his friend in need. With a force of unspecified size he marched from Medina Sidonia in the direction of Seville, but he had gone only about half way when he found his path blocked by an Umayyad detachment under Badr. He could not go on.

Abdur Rahman had made a very skillful move. Coming to know of Matari's call for help and Ghias' readiness to help him, he had despatched Badr to intercept Ghias and make sure that the reinforcements from Medina Sidonia did not get to Guadaira. It was a classic example of keeping two army forces apart, preventing their concentration and dealing with them one at a time. Ghias' force was to be kept out of battle for later attention while the main enemy at Guadaira was being tackled. Badr deployed on the road which led from Medina Sidonia, and upon the arrival of Ghias made it clear to him that he was going no further, that a lot of blood would be shed before the Lakhmite chief could proceed to the aid of

his friend.

There was no battle. The Lakhmite chief came to realise that the price which he would have to pay for his noble gesture of helping a friend in distress was too high. Consequently, he came to an understanding with Badr under which bloodshed was avoided, to the evident relief of both sides. Ghias retracted his steps to Medina Sidonia and Badr rejoined his master at the siege of Guadaira.

The failure of the column from Medina Sidonia to relieve the garrison of Guadaira darkened the prospects of the inhabitants of the town and the soldiers in the castle, many of whom stole out of the fort during the night and surrendered to their besiegers. No hope of succour remained. Matari was endowed more generously with qualities of the heart than of the head. He named a deputy, Khalifa bin Marwan, also a Yahsubite to remain in the castle in his place, while he himself with a picked body of Arabs and Berbers sallied out for a last gallant clash of arms which would end either in a glorious victory or a glorious death. It ended in an inglorious death. The head of the rebel chief was brought to Abdur Rahman who ordered it mounted on a lance and paraded before everybody.

It was now the garrison which made a move for peace. The soldiers offered the Ameer the head of their new commander, Khalifa, if the Ameer would raise the siege and take no further military action. The Ameer agreed to the terms. Khalifa was delivered up as a prisoner and beheaded on the orders of Abdur Rahman. To make sure that such an operation was not repeated, at least not here, Abdur Rahman had the fortress of Guadaira totally destroyed, turning it into an open town.

Having finished with Matari, Abdur Rahman turned to Medina Sidonia, whose chief had dared to attempt to succour a rebel against the Ameer. This man too had to be punished. Umayyad forces invested the town and its citizens soon began to feel the hardships of a siege. A few days of operations were enough however, for the inhabitants of Medina Sidonia to sue for peace, which the Ameer granted. This time there were no executions and no hostages were taken.

Hardly had the Ameer got back to Cordoba than there were two minor revolts against his rule. The first began at Jaen where Abdullah bin Khirasha of the Bani Asad called his followers to arms and declared himself independent of Cordoba. He even sent a

1. Ibn-ul-Ascer: vol 5, p 218.

2. This castle is called the Castle of Za'waq by Muslim historians.



column to raid the neighbourhood of the capital. Abdur Rahman despatched a detachment against him which scattered his little army without difficulty whereupon the rebel chief asked for pardon and was pardoned. The second incident occurred in the south-west of Spain where Ghias bin Mustabid, also of the Bani Asad, rose in revolt, but the attempt was crushed by the administrator of Beja who killed the rebel and sent his head as a trophy to Cordoba.



The above events took place in the first half of 149 Hijri (spring-summer 766). Later during the same year occurred the revolt of the greatest Yamanite of them all — Abu Sabah, Shaikh of Seville, chief of chiefs of the Yamanites who had thrown in his lot with Abdur Rahman when the young prince was seeking friends and supporters against Yusuf and Sumail. The backing of Abu Sabah had made all the difference to Abdur Rahman: without it he could not have succeeded against the established government of Spain. The Yamanite chieftain's support was not, however, entirely unselfish. He was using Abdur Rahman to destroy the Qaisite leadership at Cordoba, whereafter he would eliminate Abdur Rahman and proclaim a Yamanite government over Spain. If he was not able to put his plan into effect it was only because his followers failed to support him at the time when he needed their support. Ever since the end of the Battle of Musara, when he had tried unsuccessfully to incite his men against the Umayyad prince, he and Abdur Rahman had looked at each other with suspicion, each knowing what the other had in mind, each knowing that the other knew.

There was some sort of agreement after Musara. Abu Sabah was appointed governor of Seville of which city he was the tribal chief anyway. At this point some details are not clear. We are told that Abdul Malik bin Umar, the old Umayyad stalwart who came to Spain when Abdur Rahman invited his kinsmen to do so, was given the post of governor of Seville and had operated from there to crush Yusuf's last attempt to overthrow the Umayyad government. At the time of Matari's rebellion he was obviously not there because there is no mention in history of his resistance to the rebel, which would have been heroic. There is no mention either of Abu Sabah being there, neither as a supporter nor an opponent of the rebels

and he was too big a man to be ignored. We do know that some time after being appointed governor of Seville he was dismissed from the post by Abdur Rahman.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps his appointment and dismissal both took place after the revolt of Matari.

Abu Sabah was incensed at his dismissal and felt that Abdur Rahman was treating him like a petty Arab rather than the big chief that he was. And there was something else: Abu Sabah maintained that certain terms given him by Abdur Rahman had been violated.<sup>2</sup> His dismissal signalled the beginning of his revolt. He called his men to arms and prepared to march on Cordoba.

Abdur Rahman had no wish to face another Yamanite army in battle, this time under a redoubtable and more venerated leader than Matari. So he decided to resort to trickery. He sent Tamam bin Alqama, his *hajib* and general-at-large, to meet Abu Sabah and invite him to Cordoba under a safe conduct for talks with the Ameer. Tamam assured the old chief of Abdur Rahman's desire to avoid blood-shed, and Abu Sabah agreed to meet Abdur Rahman. He journeyed to Cordoba with a personal escort of 400 horsemen. Upon arrival at the palace he accepted the suggestion of palace officials that he leave his escort outside and go in alone to meet the Ameer. With the Ameer's invitation and safe conduct, he did not for a moment suspect that any danger could befall his person.

As soon as he came into the Ameer's chamber, Abdur Rahman berated him for what he had done. Abu Sabah had not come to listen to rebukes, not from this young upstart. He threw the prince's rebukes back at him with a few harsh words of his own. Thereupon the prince called in two bodyguards who, on their master's orders, attacked the chief with daggers and killed him.

Once the murderous deed was done, Abdur Rahman had the body removed and the palace quickly cleaned up. Then he sent for his advisers and asked what should be done about Abu Sabah. These advisors, believing that the old chief was being kept prisoner by the Ameer, were apprehensive of the 400 Yamanite warriors who stood outside the palace and outnumbered the palace guards. They gave the opinion, all but one of them, that no harm should be done to the Yamanite chieftain. After hearing what they had to say Abdur Rahman informed them that Abu Sabah had already been killed and produced his head for all to see.<sup>3</sup>

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 53.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 44.

3. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 54; Akhbar Majmua: p 106.



The Yamanite escort at the gates of the palace, which could have been expected to react with extreme violence to the murder of their general, did nothing of the sort. Upon being informed that their chief was dead, they quietly mounted their horses and rode away.

Abu Sabah, chief of chiefs of the Yamanite faction in Spain, was eliminated without any blood being shed other than his own.



The matter of Abu Sabah was concluded by the end of 149 Hijri (end of 766). The Yamanites would not rise again as a rebellious force for the next seven years. Meanwhile, a little more than a year after Abu Sabah, Abdur Rahman found himself engaged with a great Berber revolt in the north under the elusive Shaqna, a revolt which would continue for ten years. Abdur Rahman's war against Shaqna forms a separate and independent episode and is described in the following chapter.

It was in 156 Hijri (773), while Abdur Rahman was busy in operations against the Berbers at Sopetran, south-east of Guadalajara, that he received an urgent summons from his son Sulaiman in Cordoba to return to the south.<sup>1</sup> The Yamanites were on the warpath again and this was to be the largest and most widespread Yamanite uprising against Abdur Rahman.

Abdul Ghafir bin Hameed was Chief of Niebla.<sup>2</sup> Amr bin Talut was chief of Beja. Both these gentlemen, ruling over the south-western-most districts of Spain, were Yahsubites and cousins of Abu Sabah. Hayat bin Mulamis, chief of Seville, was an Arab from the Hazramaut but sympathetic to the Yahsubite cause and shared the Yahsubite desire for revenge for their murdered kinsmen. Knowing that Abdur Rahman was committed against the Berbers in the north, the three leaders coordinated their actions and called for a great Yamanite effort against the Umayyad ruler.

Their call was answered with fervour by Yamanite factions and thousands of them flocked to their leaders' standards. Their strength was augmented by a large number of Berbers who were ever ready for adventure and loot. The chiefs of Niebla and Beja marched to Seville where they joined forces with the followers of

1. According to some accounts the call was sent by Badr.

2. Also called Abdur Ghaffar by some authors.

Hayat and formed a considerable army under the overall command of Abdul Ghafir.

The main body of the rebel force advanced north of the Guadalquivir while a smaller detachment operated south of the river and captured Ecija. Their concentration and movement were so well planned and so rapidly executed that it was not till they were two days march from Cordoba that Abdur Rahman returned to the capital to learn from his great uncle, Abdul Malik bin Umar, details of the strengths and dispositions of the forces threatening Cordoba. The rebels were camped over a wide area in the valley of the River Bembezar, a small river flowing into the Guadalquivir 25 miles west of Cordoba.<sup>1</sup> It was a very large body of rebels; both Arabs and Berbers.

Abdur Rahman camped at Musara, the site of his first battle in Spain, 12 miles west of Cordoba, and refused to go to his palace while the enemy menaced the capital and the kingdom. His first action was to reorganise his army which was returning by forced marches from the north. He put all of it under Abdul Malik and instructed him to go forth and fight the rebels while he himself mustered more forces at Cordoba.

Abdul Malik was a man whose one ambition in life was to destroy the enemies of the Bani Umayya and establish Umayyad rule over Spain on unshakeable foundations. To him death in the Umayyad cause was dearer than life in Umayyad defeat and disgrace. He set off from Musara with the main body of the army, sending his son Umayya ahead as commander of the advance guard to establish contact with the enemy, to carry out reconnaissances and to remain in contact.

Young Umayya advanced and made contact but found the enemy strong and vigilant. He thought that in a clash with the rebels he would be worsted because of insufficient strength and this would bring dishonour to the family. So he broke contact and withdrew to his father's headquarters to tell him about the situation.

The father went wild with rage at what he regarded as cowardice on the part of his son. "How dare you disobey my orders and thus embolden the enemy against me!" he thundered. "If you are fleeing from death, you have come to it!"<sup>2</sup> There and then the

1. Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 51) calls this valley Wadi Qais; Ibn-ul-Qutya (p 31) calls it Wadi Munabbis and places it in the town of Bannash or Cher Bonneau.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 59.



general had his son beheaded for cowardice — a remarkable, if horrible, example of battlefield discipline.

Abdur Rahman also moved up to join the main body of the army and the opposing forces made contact in the broad valley of Bembezar. For several days there was heavy skirmishing in which fortune appears to have favoured the rebels. Abdul Ghafir made a number of attempts to outflank the Umayyads and get to Cordoba, but every attempt was foiled by Abdul Malik. Things went so badly for the Umayyads that there were times when Abdur Rahman thought that he was facing defeat, but he had been in desperate situations before and was not about to give up the struggle. This skirmishing set the stage for a great battle between the rebels led by Abdul Ghafir, who were in entrenched positions, and the Umayyad force under the Ameer, which was actually commanded in battle by Abdul Malik.

During the night Abdur Rahman moved about the camp. He wished to see how the troops felt, their mood as they sat around their camp fires. He passed by a regiment of Berbers, who were talking in their Berbers language. This started his mind on a line of thought which quickly led to a plan that could conceivably alter the ratio of strength in his favour. His Berber troops were among the best of his soldiers — loyal, steadfast, courageous. If the Berbers in Abdul Ghafir's army were of similar quality — and the fighting of the past few days suggested that they were — they must also be among his best troops. If Abdur Rahman could detach them from the Yamanites, it would make the rebel force more manageable.

He sent his officers to talk to the Berber chiefs. The Berbers were told how much better off they were under Abdur Rahman's rule than they would be under anyone else's, how cruelly the Yamanites would treat them in case they won the battle and put an end to Umayyad rule in Spain; how nice it would be if they would go to their fellows in the opposite camp and persuade them to defect and come over to Abdur Rahman's side. The prince would reward them generously. The talks had their effect; the Berbers agreed to do just as the prince wished.

The following morning the two armies formed up for battle in the Valley of Bembezar. Abdul Ghafir's was the larger and more imposing force, Abdur Rahman's smaller but better organised. Before battle began the Berbers of the rebel army said to their Arab comrades "We fight better on horseback. Mount us on your horses."<sup>1</sup>

1. Ibn-ul-Qutya: p 32.

The Arabs accepted the proposal. They acknowledged the fact that the Berbers were superb fighters on horseback. They gave a sufficient number of horses to the Berbers to mount every one of them, themselves accepting the role of infantrymen in battle. No sooner were all the Berbers mounted than they rode off as a body and came over to the Umayyad side.

The Umayyads now launched their attack, and what followed was a brutal slogging match in which no quarter was given or taken. The carnage continued for most of the day and by the afternoon the rebel army was roundly defeated. 30,000 warriors lay dead on the battle-field, most of them from the rebel army of Abdul Ghafir. A trench in which their bodies were buried was to be visible as a landmark two centuries later.<sup>1</sup> Abdul Ghafir and Hayat bin Mulamis got away from the battlefield and withdrew in haste to Seville.

When the battle was over, Abdul Malik lay on the ground, blood oozing from his wounds and dripping from his sword, the hilt of which was still tightly clutched in his hand. Abdur Rahman came to his great uncle. He knelt beside the old hero and kissed him between the eyes. "O cousin," he said, "I shall arrange for my son and heir, Hisham, to marry your daughter. I award her such and such, I award you such and such and your children such and such. I appoint you and your sons as viziers."<sup>2</sup>

One battle was enough for the present, especially such a battle as this. Abdur Rahman returned to Cordoba and remained there for the rest of the year.



In the following year, 157 Hijri (774), Abdur Rahman set off again with his army for Seville, which still bristled with rebel weapons under Abdul Ghafir and Hayat. The rebels had to be punished, the Yamanite resistance had to be broken once and for all and a lesson taught to others who might harbour designs against Umayyad rule.

The Umayyads stormed into Seville. They were strongly opposed by the Yamanite faction but without success. The Umayyads struck without mercy and slew a large number of Yamanite partisans before the last resistance ended. This was no

1. *Ibid.*

2. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 4; Maqqari: vol 3, p 59.



longer battle; it was punitive action, an act of vengeance carried to the extreme.

Hayat bin Mulamis lost his life in the fighting. Abdul Ghafir got away again and made his way to the coast from where he took a vessel for the east, for Syria, where he spent the rest of his days.<sup>1</sup>

Never again would the Yamanites rise as a group against Abdur Rahman, Ameer of Spain.

1. This is *Akhbar Majmua* (p 108). According to Ibn Khaldun (vol 4, p 268) Hayat too got away and sailed to Syria. According to Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 51) he fled to Seville but later wrote to the Ameer for pardon, which was granted.

## 16: SHAQNA THE BERBER

Shaqna, son of Abdul Wahid, was a school teacher living in a district of Santaver (Shant Bariyya), an ancient province which has long ceased to exist but which corresponded roughly to the present province of Cuenca lying between Madrid and Valencia. He was a Berber from the tribe of Meknasa. The man possessed an ambition, an imagination, a tenacity and resilience in conflict of which he gave no indication while he taught the children at his school.

During the period when Abdur Rahman was engaged in operations against Matari and Abu Sabah, he took into his head that he was the right man to assume the mantle of leadership of the Berbers and lead them in war of conquest against the Arabs — a war which would end in a great Berber victory and the establishment of Berber rule over Spain. Thus those who had been the first Muslims to conquer Spain under Tariq bin Ziyad 40 years before, would become the sole owners of power in the country. The man was either a visionary or a charlatan, depending on whether he is seen through Berber eyes or Arab eyes. His was an exciting dream and his faith in it never faltered during the ten years in which he played hide and seek with Abdur Rahman and led the Ameer a merry chase in the mountains of his native Santaver.

In 150 Hijri (767) he announced to his followers that he was descended from the Prophet's daughter Fatima, through her son Hassan. His claim was totally false but he persisted in it. He took the name of Abdullah bin Muhammad and assumed the title of Al Fatmi — the Fatimid — which was correct only to the extent that his mother's name was Fatima.<sup>1</sup> He became a holy man. This had a strong impact on the Berbers who were always drawn towards holy men and mystics and venerated them above all others. They flocked to him. Gradually their numbers increased and Shaqna found himself at the head of a considerable body of warlike Berbers personally devoted to him. Later some Arabs would join him too, out of hostility to the Umayyad rule. Arab historians have called his Berbers followers a rabble,<sup>2</sup> but if they had won the war which they waged against the Arabs, history would have honoured them by a better appellation.

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer : vol 5, p 224; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 55.

2. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 54.



Some time in 151 Hijri (768) Shaqna took the field. He stormed the town and castle of Sopetran,<sup>1</sup> capital of the province of Santaver, and made it his headquarters. This town was built on an eminence not far from the confluence of the rivers Tagus and Guadiella, some 20 miles south-east of Guadalajara, and is now believed to be the town of Castro de Santover.<sup>2</sup> After consolidating his power over the province he set out to conquer the north-western part of the Ameer's domain, the part in which the Berbers predominated.

He marched through the plain between the Tagus and the Guadiana, and wherever he went the Berbers rose to join him and serve under his standard, accepting him as their spiritual and temporal ruler. He entered the province of Merida and was able to capture without difficulty the three towns of Quria (Caceres), Merida and Medellin. The administrator of Merida was Abu Za'bal, a Berber chief loyal to Abdur Rahman, and this man was killed by the local Berbers during the fighting in the town. After this conquest Shaqna returned to his headquarters in Sopetran, having appointed Berber administrators loyal to himself over the conquered towns. He was master of a wide belt of Spanish territory lying between the Rivers Tagus and Guadiana, stretching from Merida in the west to the mountains of Cuenca in the east. He had cut a swathe through the Ameer's realm, separating Toledo in the north from Andalusia in the south. Shaqna ruled the territory but did not collect taxes; he just plundered the countryside whenever he felt the need for money.



In the following year, 152 Hijri (769), Abdur Rahman advanced against Shaqna with the intention of bringing him to battle and putting an end to the revolt, as he had done with all other rebels in the country. He arrived at Sopetran to find it evacuated. The rebel chief had no desire to face the Umayyad army in a set-piece battle in which the less sophisticated Berbers would be at a disadvantage, and had moved his forces into the foothills east of Sopetran. Abdur Rahman followed him into the hills, hoping to get to grips with the rebel. Several engagements were fought between

the Arabs and the Berbers, after each of which the Berbers withdrew deeper into the mountains, drawing the Arabs on in their wake. After a few clashes Abdur Rahman found himself fighting in difficult mountainous terrain where his cavalry was of little use and the nimble Berbers had every advantage. The Ameer broke contact and came down to the plains.

Before returning to Cordoba he appointed a new governor at Toledo, viz Habeeb bin Abdul Malik and instructed him to continue the pressure against the Berbers. Habeeb sent an officer named Sulaiman bin Usman to Sopetran to put the Ameer's orders into effect. While Sulaiman was still preparing his troops to march against the rebels, Shaqna swooped down from the mountains and attacked the Ameer's forces at Sopetran. Sulaiman was slain, his troops were defeated, and Shaqna again established himself as master of the castle of Sopetran. As a result of this victory even more Berbers, who had hitherto sat on the fence to see how the contest progressed, threw in their lot with Shaqna.

In the year which followed, 153 Hijri (770), Abdur Rahman again came to deal with the rebel but again the rebel evacuated Sopetran and took to the hills. This time Abdur Rahman contented himself with consolidating his hold over the town and surrounding areas, and after a few weeks returned to Cordoba. However, knowing that the Berbers were lurking not far from the town and awaiting an opportunity to pounce upon it, he sent Badr to command the garrison of Sopetran and do whatever was possible to dispel the threat.

Badr arrived at Sopetran and at once began preparations to bring Shaqna to battle, but he was not any luckier than his master. As he advanced into the foothills, the rebels fell back to higher ridges and Badr found himself embroiled with an enemy who stayed out of reach while yet making a nuisance of himself. Badr too disengaged and returned to Sopetran where he remained on his guard against a surprise attack by the Berbers.

Shaqna stayed in his mountain fastness. He began what we would now call guerrilla warfare: raiding settlements, carrying off live-stock, killing any Umayyad parties caught in a vulnerable state, never getting committed to serious fighting against strong government forces. These guerrilla operations continued into the year 154 Hijri (771) when Abdur Rahman rejoined Badr at Sopetran and the two of them made another unsuccessful attempt to get Shaqna.

1. The town has also been called Shaitaran (Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 267; Ibn-ul-Adeer: vol 6, p 3) and Shubatran (Ibn Izari vol 2, p 54).  
2. Dozy: p 202.



This was Abdur Rahman's first experience of dealing with a guerrilla enemy who struck and vanished before his own forces could react, who refused to be drawn into battle. Abdur Rahman could not pursue the rebel deep into the mountains while Shaqna could debouch into the plain at will and strike at any target of his choice. Thus the war continued with the elusive Berber remaining out of reach and government forces doing little more than maintain control over the plains. The situation was more damaging to Abdur Rahman than to his adversary, for Abdur Rahman was the monarch who had not only to maintain physical control over his realm but also to retain the confidence of his subjects, while Shaqna was a glorified brigand who need do nothing more than raid and plunder and wait for a suitable opportunity for an easy victory.

This opportunity presented itself when, towards the end of the year 154 Hijri (771), Abdur Rahman returned to Cordoba and took Badr with him, leaving a garrison to hold Sopenan. Shaqna again swooped down from the mountains and recaptured the town. He was once again master of the province and once again his standard fluttered from the ramparts of the castle.

This time Abdur Rahman decided to send a major force against the rebel. In 155 Hijri (772) he organised an expedition under command of Tamam bin Alqama and his old supporter, Ubaidullah bin Usman, and gave them the mission of bringing Shaqna to battle wherever possible and destroying his mischief once and for all.

The two generals advanced into the neighbourhood of Sopenan and set up camp not far from the town. Ubaidullah sent his nephew Wajeeh to hold parleys with Shaqna and to persuade him to submit to Umayyad rule. Instead of achieving the desired purpose, however, the parleys ended in a directly opposite result: the rebel talked the Arab emissary into turning against the Ameer and joining the rebels (for which crime he would later be murdered by two assassins sent for the purpose by Abdur Rahman).<sup>1</sup>

Ubaidullah and Tamam were waiting in their camp to see what answer their emissary would bring before deciding their next course of action, when suddenly they were assaulted by a wild horde of Berbers led by Shaqna and guided by the treacherous Wajeeh. Taken completely off guard, the bulk of the Umayyad soldiers sought safety in flight, along with the two generals, while

those who stood to stem the rush of the Berbers were cut to pieces. The camp of the Umayyad army was taken as a prize of war and thoroughly plundered by the jubilant Berbers.

Following this victory, Shaqna advanced to the castle of Huwariyun, known also as Madain.<sup>1</sup> The administrator of this place, an official of the Umayyad government, took refuge in the citadel but Shaqna tricked him out on the pretence of talks and then killed him. After that he stormed the citadel and seized control of the town.

Abdur Rahman made one more attempt to fight the rebel on his home ground. In 156 Hijri (773) he laid siege to Sopenan but hardly had a few days passed when Shaqna broke out of the town and withdrew into his mountains. Abdur Rahman set out to tackle him in the mountains but he had not gone far when he received news from Cordoba about the uprising of the Yamanites under Abdul Ghafir and Hayat. Giving up all thought of bearding the Berber lion in his den, the prince returned in haste to deal with the menace of the Yamanites, an account of which has been given in the preceding chapter. Shaqna came down from his mountains once again and re-established his rule over the town of Sopenan and the province of Santaver.



For the rest of the year and much of the year that followed, Abdur Rahman remained occupied with the operations against the Yamanites. After the last action of that campaign had ended, i.e. by the end of 157 Hijri (774), he was ready again to deal with his Berber adversary.

By now Abdur Rahman had become thoroughly disillusioned with the Arabs in Spain. He found them disloyal, deceitful, undisciplined, unpredictable and untrustworthy.<sup>2</sup> He could no longer rely on them to fight his battles and maintain him on the throne. If he was to consolidate his power and remain the undisputed ruler of Spain, he would have to have at his disposal an army whose undivided loyalty he could rely on and which would always be at his beck and call. It would have to consist of soldiers who were immune to tribal and partisan pressures and whose sole

1. There is no way of locating this place.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 36; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 268; Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p. 64.



interest lay in the service of the Ameer.

Abdur Rahman began to raise a new army, part of which consisted of slaves — not the kind of domestic slaves available to any body in the slave market but warrior-slaves, men taken prisoner in battle who were regarded as slaves by virtue of their capture. Such men were employed not for household service but for fighting and were often the best of soldiers. Abdur Rahman bought a large number of them as his personal property and enlisted them in units as professional fulltime soldiers.

But such soldiers were in a minority. The bulk of the new army consisted of Berbers from North Africa. His agents scoured the provinces on the other side of the Strait of Gibraltar to recruit Berber warriors for service in Spain. Attracted by the handsome pay offered and the prospect of living a life of prestige and position in a more pleasant country than the wilds which they inhabited, they came in their thousands to serve their new master. This was the first time that such an experiment had been attempted in Spain: a mercenary army recruited largely from outside, loyal to the ruler, and it was to prove Abdur Rahman's greatest strength. Eventually the new army would number 40,000, an army mainly of Berbers but also including other nations.<sup>1</sup> It took several years to reach that figure, but by the spring of 158 Hijri (775), when Abdur Rahman took up once again the challenge of Shaqna, part of the new army was ready for the field. Its numbers were augmented by loyal Arab troops.

This time the Ameer adopted a wider and more comprehensive strategy to deal with his Berber adversary. All the past military operations had failed to bring him to battle under conditions suitable for regular government troops. Shaqna still ruled over the territory he had seized in 151 Hijri, stretching from Merida to the hills of Cuenca and he still commanded the loyal support of all Berbers inhabiting his territory. Abdur Rahman would now combine political and psychological measures with military operations.

He first marched westwards and subdued the region of Merida and Caceres. The berber opposition was brutally suppressed. On the plea of taking revenge for the death of his administrator, Abu Za'bal, seven years before, he had a large number of Berbers executed, all who might have had a hand in his killing. He seized Shaqna's lieutenant in Merida, Abbas bin Qalush Abu Mazkana of

the Berber tribe of Masmuda, but we do not know whether this man was executed or spared or what other punishment he received.<sup>1</sup> This operation against Merida, apart from frightening the Berbers and discouraging them from supporting their chief, had the additional effect of detaching the western part of the rebel territory from which Shaqna would now no longer receive aid and reinforcement.

Abdur Rahman next marched to the province of Santaver and to its capital, Sopenan. On hearing of the Ameer's coming, Shaqna evacuated the town, as per his custom, and took shelter in the hills. This time, however, Abdur Rahman did not pursue him as he had done in the past. He tried a different course of action to cut the ground away from under the Berber general's feet.

There was another prominent Berber chieftain living in the eastern part of Spain, one named Hilal. He had subordinated himself to Shaqna in the cause of the campaign for the conquest of Spain, although as chief of his tribe his standing was higher than Shaqna's, whose past was no more distinguished than that of a school teacher. Abdur Rahman gave his backing to this chieftain. He appointed Hilal as chief of all Berbers in the eastern part of the country and ruler of the province, and saw to it that the benefits which he gained from submission to Umayyad rule were sufficient to keep him from switching loyalties.<sup>2</sup>

It was a very clever political stratagem, and it worked. Hilal had a considerable personal following, and winning him over to the government side was a victory for the Ameer. Why hilal turned against Shaqna — whether in pursuit of power or because he was getting tired of a war which did not seem to end — will never be known, but his defection had the effect of crippling Shaqna. Finding himself denied the support of a large number of Berbers, he withdrew even deeper in his mountains, into a more inaccessible wilderness where the Ameer was not likely to follow him.

But the Ameer did follow him. In the two succeeding years — 159 and 160 Hijri (late 775 to late 777) the Ameer pressed against the weakening Berber leader, going farther into the mountains of Cuenca than he had done before, hoping to force the Berber to make a last stand. The thought that this was the only rebel leader who had outmanoeuvred him, had eluded him and survived as a

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 55.

2. Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 54) gives 155 Hijri as the year of this subversion, but it is more likely to have been later, as stated above, marking the beginning of the end of Shaqna.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 37; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 268.



fighting challenger for nearly a decade, irked the prince's proud spirit. Shaqna had posed a bigger and more dangerous threat than anyone else, and so long as he lived, Abdur Rahman could not sleep in peace. Perhaps, feared the prince, he was even now preparing a cunning counterstroke as he had done so often before. The man had to be caught and suitably punished, his mischief ended for good.

Shaqna was preparing no such counterstroke. He was in a bad way. Because of the defection of a large number of Berbers and a loss of enthusiasm among those who remained, he had fallen upon difficult times. Moreover, in this time of misfortune, his closest friends were turning against him, some under the influence of the Ameer's bribes.

Two of these friends were to become his executioners: Daud bin Hilal and Kinana bin Saeed, the former being the son of the newly appointed pro-Umayyad chieftain. At a place called Qaryat-ul-Uyun, while the tired old guerrilla rested unsuspecting and unprepared, they fell upon him and killed him.<sup>1</sup> The assassins carried Shaqna's head to Abdur Rahman.<sup>2</sup>

This happened in 160 Hijri (777) ten years after Shaqna had declared his independence at Sopotran. It was a shameful end for such a man, one who could have been king of Spain — the first Berber king — and started a new dynasty of his own. History has not been kind to Shaqna bin Abdul Wahid, alias Abdullah bin Mohammad, alias al Fatmi, perhaps because the history of the time has been written by Arab historians who saw more virtue in an Arab ruler than in a potential Berber one.

The attempt of the Berbers under Shaqna to impose Berber rule in Spain failed. The Berbers would not rule the country till three centuries later when the Murabitun of the Maghreb would cross the Strait to protect the Muslims of Spain against the advancing Christians.

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 111.  
2. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 268.

## 17: ABDUR RAHMAN AND THE CHRISTIANS

Abdur Rahman was not exhausted by the battles he had been fighting for more than two decades. But the reader might be exhausted after sixteen chapters of battle and blood, of violence and treachery. He deserves a break. We will pause from the fighting for a while and take a few pages off to relax with less violent subjects. The first of these is a beautiful young lady named Sara, a Gothic princess whom Muslim historians have known by the appellation of Al Qutya... the *Lady Goth*.

The last king of the Goths in Spain was Roderic. He had succeeded king Witiza. Roderic was not of the family of Witiza, not of royal blood. He was a distinguished general, commander of the Gothic cavalry under Witiza and Duke of Baetica, the southern province of Spain. After the death of Witiza the senate and the officials elected Roderic to the throne, rejecting the claims of the three sons of Witiza, viz Akhila, Olmondo and Artabas.

The princes never forgave him for this. A sizeable faction formed around the sons of Witiza which regarded Roderic as a usurper and sought ways and means of unseating him and replacing him on the throne with one of the sons of the late king. Their opportunity came in 711 when Tariq bin Ziyad invaded Spain with a Muslim army and faced the Gothic army of Roderic on the bank of the River Barbate.<sup>1</sup>

The wings of Roderic's army were composed of partisans of Witiza and commanded by the sons of Witiza. They parleyed with the Muslim army commander: they would defect if the Muslims promised to return to them the property of their father, 3000 choice estates which king Roderic had confiscated. The claim was not entirely fair because the estates were crown lands, belonging to the state and held by the king in his capacity as ruling monarch, but the princes regarded them as a family inheritance and their faction supported their claim. Tariq agreed to the condition. The faction of Witiza defected at a crucial moment in battle, which made it easier for the Muslims to score a massive victory over the Goths. Roderic died by drowning in the River Barbate during his flight from the battlefield.

After the battle the princes came to Tariq. "Are you yourself

1. For an account of this battle, see this writer's "The Muslim Conquest of Spain."



the commander or is there a commander above you?" they asked.

"No," replied Tariq, "above me there is a commander and above that commander there is a supreme commander".<sup>1</sup>

Tariq sent them to his superior commander in North Africa, Musa bin Nusair, and Musa sent them on to Caliph al Waleed at Damascus. The Caliph received the princes with much honour and confirmed the agreement made by Tariq. The brothers returned to Spain to take possession of the promised lands and settled down to a life of dignity and leisure — Olmondo in Seville, Artabas in Cordoba and Akhila in Toledo. The 3000 estates were divided up in three distinct areas, each brother getting 1000: Olmondo between the Guadalquivir and the Guadiana, Artabas on the banks of the Guadalquivir, the Guadajoz and the Guadabullon, and Akhila on the banks of the Ebro.<sup>2</sup>

The years passed. Olmondo died. When that happened, Artabas, living in Cordoba, grabbed his late brother's property and incorporated it into his own, leaving his brother's children without their inheritance. The children were Sara, a young maiden, and two younger boys.

Sara was a girl of spirit, not one to let anyone trample upon her rights. She did not turn to uncle Akhila for help, nor to the Muslim governor of Spain who at that time was Abul Khattar (743 - 745). She took a ship from Seville and alongwith her little brothers sailed all the way to Syria. After landing at Asqalan, she travelled by road to Damascus and demanded to see the Caliph, now Hisham bin Abdul Malik (724-743).

She was ushered into the Caliph's presence. She noticed a boy standing beside the Caliph and came to know that his name was Abdur Rahman and that he was the Caliph's grandson, but she did not know that this boy would one day become Ameer Abdur Rahman of Spain. Sara put her case before the ruler of the Muslim world. She reminded him of the authority of Caliph al Waleed giving her father possession of 1000 estates, she told him how her uncle Artabas had seized her late father's property and made it his own, and she demanded justice.

The Caliph was impressed not only by the intelligence and spirit of the girl but also by her beauty. He wrote orders to the

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 265; Ibn-ul-Qutya: pp 3-4.

2. Simonet: p 42.

Viceroy of North Africa to instruct the Governor of Spain to see to the restoration of her property. He also made her a proposal of marriage on behalf of an Arab named Isa bin Muzahim. Sara was so dazzled by the grace and refinement of Arab life in Damascus that she readily accepted the proposal. She got married and returned to Spain with her husband, reclaimed her property and resumed a gracious life in Seville.

She bore Isa two sons, namely Ibrahim and Ishaq, from one of whom was descended the famous 10th Century Spanish Muslim historian, Ibn-ul-Qutya ... *Son of the Lady Goth*.

Her husband died during the year when Abdur Rahman landed in Spain. After that she received many proposals of marriage, including one from Hayat bin Mulamis, chief of the Arabs of Seville who was later to rebel against the Ameer, but she turned them all down.

She began to visit Abdur Rahman in his palace at Cordoba and the two would recall with pleasure their first meeting in the court of Caliph Hisham. She was given free access to the palace where she was welcomed with honour and affection. Later, on a plea from Abdur Rahman, she married Umair bin Saeed and bore him a son who was named Habeeb. All her sons became ancestors of distinguished clans in Spain which took pride at being descended from the *Lady Goth*.<sup>1</sup>



Uncle Artabas, after returning to Sara her father's property, stopped being a villain. He lived a life of ease and splendour as a prominent citizen of Cordoba, known not only for his intelligence and wit but also for his generosity and hospitality. He kept a princely court in the city which was frequented by Arab nobles who would come to enjoy his company and hospitality. He also became a noted political figure. He would meet with the governor of Spain and advise him about various political matters. It was on the advice of Artabas that governor Abul Khattar decided to send the Syrians away from Cordoba and settle them in districts at a distance from the capital, as narrated in Chapter 6.<sup>2</sup>

One day he received a visit from ten notable Syrians among whom were three who have already been mentioned in this book: Sumail bin Hatim, Ubaidullah bin Usman and his son-in-law, Abdullah bin Khalid. The two last-mentioned were the chiefs who

1. Maqqari: vol 1, pp 266 -267; Ibn-ul-Qutya: pp 4-6.

2. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Espana Musulmana*: vol 1, p 128.



were to later prepare the ground for the coming of Abdur Rahman and who sent a vessel to ferry him across from North Africa. While these Arabs were sitting and chatting, another visitor appeared at the house. This was Maimun the Pious, a client of the Syrians who was known in Cordoba for his piety and asceticism.

Artabas saw him enter the room. He rose to receive him, embraced him and asked him to sit in his own chair which was covered with cloth of gold. He tried to lead his visitor to the chair but Maimun refused to sit on it and sat instead on the floor. Artabas too sat down on the floor beside him and asked: "My lord, what brings a man like you to visit a man like me?"

"We came to this land for the holy war," began Maimun. "We did not expect that our stay would be a long one. We made no preparations for a long stay. Then that happened to our friends which we could never have imagined, and we can now never return to our homes. Allah has been bountiful to you. I ask that you give me one of your estates which I shall cultivate with my own hands. I shall pay you your due and keep the share to which I am entitled."

"No, by God," replied Artabas. "I can never agree to giving you an estate on a half share basis. I will give it to you as a gift."

Then he sent for his secretary and instructed him: "Give him the pasture in the Valley of Shush and all that is in it of cattle and sheep and slaves. Give him also our estate and castle in Jaen."

Maimun the Pious thanked the master of the house and took his leave. Artabas returned to his seat.

The Syrians had watched this exchange with speechless amazement. When Maimun had left, Sumail said, "O Artabas, all that prevents you from conserving the inheritance of your father is the extravagant way in which you are using it up. I am the leader of the Arabs in Spain, I am here with these companions who are the leaders of the clients in Spain. You show us no more respect than letting us sit on these wooden chairs. Yet this beggar comes in and you treat him with such generosity!"

"O Father of Jaushan," replied Artabas, "people of your faith tell me that their teachings have not penetrated your head, else you would not disapprove of the good work that I have done." He went on to give Sumail a sermon on sharing the bounties of God with the less fortunate. Sumail was an unlettered but proud man and on hearing the words of Artabas, he acted as if he had "swallowed a

stone."

The visitors ignored the remarks of their host. They were intent on getting something for themselves from this prince of princely generosity while his princely mood lasted. "Let that be," they said to Artabas, "and see to the matter about which we have come to you, which is the same as the object of this man who came to see you and whom you treated so generously."

Artabas got the point. They wanted to get something out of him. "You are the rulers of this land," he said. "You would not be satisfied with a little. So I give you a hundred estates which you can divide among yourselves at ten per person."

This was done. Among these estates were Torrox, which went to Ubaidullah bin Usman and where Prince Abdur Rahman stayed after landing in Spain; Alfontin, which went to Abdullah bin Khalid; and an olive orchard at Almodover which went to Sumail.<sup>1</sup>

That was in the days when Yusuf and Sumail ruled over the country. Then came the Pretender who overthrew the government in power and established himself as Ameer of Spain. Artabas was the perfect courtier; he paid his respects to the new ruler. Abdur Rahman took to him, would send for him and would take him along on his travels.

Then, one day, misfortune struck the Gothic prince. He was accompanying the Ameer on one of his campaigns and they had set up camp for the night. Artabas' tent was next to the tent of Abdur Rahman. The Ameer looked at his companion's tent and saw it surrounded by packages and bundles — all manner of goods which had come to Artabas from his servants and slaves working his numerous estates. This was quite normal for Artabas; he was always receiving goods from his estates, apart from numerous gifts which were sent to him by his friends.

There was nothing around the tent of Abdur Rahman. Nobody sent him anything. He looked with envy, and then with anger at the luxurious tent of the Gothic prince surrounded by every evidence of opulence. Then, in a fit of temper, he ordered the confiscation of all the property of Artabas, all his estates and worldly goods. The order was implemented without delay and everything which Artabas possessed was taken away from him.

The Gothic prince became penniless overnight. He went to his nephews and nieces for help but got little. Perhaps they remembered how shabbily he had treated the orphaned children of his own brother and had little sympathy to spare for their aging and

1 Maqqari: vol 1, pp 267 - 268; Ibn-ul-Qutya: pp 38-40.



impoverished uncle. As a result, he became a destitute and suffered from the ravages of poverty and neglect.

After some time, when he felt that life had been unkind enough for long enough, he decided to see Abdur Rahman. He went to the chamberlain of the palace and asked him to arrange for him an audience with the Ameer, saying that he wished to bid the Ameer farewell. The audience was granted.

Abdur Rahman looked with surprise at the penniless son of a Gothic king, now dressed in rags. "O Artabas," he said, "what brings you here?"

"You have brought me here," replied Artabas. "You have interposed between me and my property. You have violated the treaties which your ancestors made with me while I have committed no crime to justify such action."

Abdur Rahman ignored the allegation. "What is this about your saying farewell?" he asked. "I assume that you wish to go to Rome."

"No," replied Artabas, "but it has come to my ears that you wish to go to Syria."

Abdur Rahman was puzzled by the words of the Goth. "Who is going to let me return to Syria?" he asked rhetorically. "You know that I was driven out by the sword."

Artabas then said, "This place which you have won for your self; do you wish to pass it on to your son after you or do you intend that he should be deprived of what you have gained?"

"By Allah," swore the Ameer, "I seek nothing but to preserve this possession for myself and my progeny."

"Then listen ..." Artabas told him things about the situation in Spain of which Abdur Rahman was ignorant, things which no one had told him before. He advised him about the actions that he must take, actions which no one else had advised him about.

Abdur Rahman listened with rapt attention. He was not only impressed but also moved by the action of the Gothic prince warning him of shortcomings in his rule and educating him about certain finer points in the local situation which Arab advisers were either not sophisticated enough to know or not honest enough to tell him.

He thanked Artabas profusely for the service which he had rendered by telling him all this. He showed his favour by conferring on Artabas the rank of Count — the first such rank conferred in Muslim Spain — and by restoring to him twenty of his estates. This

was sufficient to enable the old prince, now count, to live a life of leisure for the rest of his days.<sup>1</sup>

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We return to war, for the story of Abdur Rahman the Immigrant is essentially a story of war. And we return, after the passage of many years and many chapters, to the north, to the kingdom of Asturias. As we enter Asturias, figuratively, we enter a part of history coloured by prejudice, confused by contradiction, distorted by falsehood, a forest half real and half imaginary in which the unwary scholar could easily lose himself. We have to depend on the same sources which tell us that after the Battle of Covadonga, a mountain on which 63,000 Arabs had crowded rose and hurled them into the River Deva. (See Chapter 2). We will do our best to steer an intelligent course through this forest of myth and legend.

Alfonso I, whose deeds have been briefly narrated in Chapter 8, died in 757, the year after Abdur Rahman took Cordoba. During his reign he pushed the Muslims to the south, to the River Duero, and created a barrier of desolation north of that river. His son Fruela, who succeeded him on the throne and ruled from 757 to 768, was a hard and severe man... "a man with iron in his arms and iron in his spirit."<sup>2</sup> He killed his brother Vimara with his own hands. He dealt severely with the church, even whipping in the churches and monasteries those priests and monks who had contracted marriage, as a large number had done during generations of Gothic rule. He re-established celibacy as a mandatory condition for the priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

We are told by Christian sources that while Abdur Rahman was busy fighting his own rebellious subjects, Fruela waged incessant warfare against the Muslims in North-Western Spain; that he fought many battles of which the most famous was at Pontuvium (Pontuvo) in what is now the province of La Corunia in the north-western part of Galicia. In this battle 54,000 Arabs are said to have been slain and their commander, young Umar, son of the Ameer, was taken prisoner and beheaded on the orders of

1. Ibn-ul-Qutya: pp 36 - 38.

2. Pidal: vol 6, p 36.

3. Sanchez-Albornoz: *The kingdom of Asturias*: pp 186-187; Pidal: vol 6, p 37.



Fruela.<sup>1</sup> This is totally untrue. There was no battle between the forces of Fruela and those of Abdur Rahman who was already engaged in a life and death struggle with his fellow Muslims and was too busy fighting for survival to send a vast army to the north western corner of Spain, so vast that it could lose in battle 54,000 men. The armies commanded by Abdur Rahman in his battles against rebel chiefs seldom hit the five figure mark. As for son Umar, commander of this vast army and captured and executed on the battlefield, this is a figment of the story-teller's imagination.

We are informed by Muslim sources that Fruela conquered North-Western Spain from where he drove out the Muslims, that he captured Lugo, Oporto, Zamora, Salamanca and Castile.<sup>2</sup> This too could not be true because these places were taken earlier by Alfonso I who then created his zone of devastation north of the Duero. It is possible that some historians attributed the operations of Fruela, brother of Alfonso, who played an important role in his conquests, to Fruela son of Alfonso. What is more likely is that the early Christian writers, looking for victories with which to glorify the rising Asturian kingdom and not finding any, invented them. If there was war between king Fruela and the Muslims, it could not have been anything more than border skirmishes along the frontier established in the time of Alfonso and shown on Map 3.

Abdur Rahman is reported to have sent an expedition to Castile under Badr towards the end of Fruela's reign, which ended in 768. This was probably a raid in force, in 149 or 150 Hijri (766-767), after he had finished with Matari and before the Berber Shaqna started his long war against Cordoba. Badr advanced into the district of Alava, near the upper reaches of the River Ebro, and returned with booty which he called tribute and captives whom he called hostages. This was the only force ever sent by Abdur Rahman to the north of Spain.

Fruela had a great deal of trouble with the Galicians in the north - west and the Vascones who were his eastern neighbours and most of whom were later to be known as Basques. The Galicians and the Basques were free barbarian peoples who had for centuries lived a free, barbarian life. They resented the encroachment into their mountain regions of the barbarians of the new Asturian

1. Levi-Provencal: p 76; Sanchez-Albornoz: *The kingdom of Asturias*: pp 183-184; Pidal: vol 6, p 36.

2. Maqqari: vol 1, p 330; Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, pp 386 - 387.

kingdom and fought to keep them out. Fruela beat them into submission, not to make them citizens of his new realm but to keep them in a state of subordination so that they would acknowledge the king of Asturias as overlord. During the operations in the Basque country he captured a beautiful Basque maiden named Munia and took her to his bed. Munia became the mother of a boy who would later become Alfonso the Chaste, one of the great kings of Asturias.

Fruela came to a violent end. Having murdered his brother Vimara, he himself fell, at Conga de Onis, under the daggers of the partisans of Vimara. His death was followed by twenty years of peace between the Asturians and the Muslims. There is talk of a truce,<sup>1</sup> but there was actually no such thing. Abdur Rahman had no relations whatever with the Asturian kingdom; for him it did not formally exist.

Fruela was followed on the throne by his cousin Aurelio, son of the Fruela who was a brother of Alfonse. During his reign there was a widespread revolt of slaves which started in Galicia, but it was crushed by Aurelio and the slaves remained slaves. He was not by nature an aggressive man and neither looked for trouble with the Muslims nor had any.

Upon his death the throne went to Silo, husband of Adosinda who was a daughter of Alfonso. Silo's mother was an Arab who had been taken captive in some operation and became the property of a Gothic lord. During Silo's reign there was a serious uprising in Galicia, to deal with which the king had to fight a bloody battle in the area of Lugo before the rebels were crushed. Silo also never engaged in warfare with the Muslims.

Silo was followed, strangely enough, by another king whose mother was Muslim. This was Mauregato, the illegitimate son of Alfonso, who reigned from 783 to 789 and remained at peace with the Muslims. His name could mean "son of the captive Moorish woman,"<sup>2</sup> probably another of the Arab or Berber girls taken in Christian raids and adorning the bed of King Alfonso.

After Mauregato came Bermudo, son of the Fruela who was brother of Alfonso. But we stop here because we have got beyond the reign of Abdur Rahman the Immigrant. We will take up in a later work the reign of Bermudo and Alfonso the Chaste who followed him.

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1. Levi-Provencal: p 77.

2. Pidal: vol 6, p 201.



Historians have given us the text of a treaty signed by Abdur Rahman with the Christians in which he placed certain imposts upon them. Because of the reference to "Qashtala" in the Arabic text, some historians have presumed that Abdur Rahman conquered old Castile and have wondered how he could have done so.<sup>1</sup> The Qashtala of this treaty was not Castile but the town of Castella in the district of Elvira (the future Granada) and Abdur Rahman made these imposts because the Christians of this district had helped Yusuf and Sumail against him after the Battle of Musara.<sup>2</sup>

The text of the treaty reads:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent the Merciful. Bond of security from the Great King Abdur Rahman to the patricians and monks and nobles and other Christians and Spaniards of Qashtala and their followers in other districts.

Bond of security and peace. He assumes upon himself responsibility for it so long as they continue to pay annually for a period of five years: 10,000 ounces of gold, 10,000 ounces of silver, 10,000 of the best horses and the same number of mules, with 1000 coats of mail, 1000 iron helmets and the same number of lances.

Written in the city of Cordoba on Safar 3, 142 Hijri (758).<sup>3</sup>

No historian has questioned the veracity of this report or the accuracy of the text, which is attributed to the noted Spanish Arab historian Ibn-ul-Khateeb. There undoubtedly was a treaty of some sort between Abdur Rahman and the Christian population of Castella, but whether any district or group of districts of 8th Century Spain could have borne such a staggering burden of imposts is open to serious doubt.

There were other contacts and clashes between Abdur Rahman and the Christians living in the north-east of Spain, the region of the Pyrenees and the River Ebro, but these took place later and are dealt with in Chapter 20.

## 18: REVOLT IN THE NORTH - EAST

In the north-east of Spain, two prominent geographical features separate the Iberian peninsula from the main body of Europe, separate Spain from France. These are the Pyrenees Mountains and the River Ebro, which run almost parallel with a distance of 50-80 miles between them. Through the Pyrenees Mountains run the passes along which from ancient times invading armies have marched from one side to the other. Because of these natural features, especially the Pyrenees, this region of mountains and river is of the highest strategic importance and confers upon its possessor distinct military advantages for purposes of offence and defence.

The Muslims called this region the Upper Frontier and regarded it as the fourth province of Spain. Its capital was the ancient city of Saragosa on the bank of the Ebro, an important communication centre which would later become the capital of the kingdom of Aragon. For the Muslims it had an added significance because it bordered the land of the Franks to the north and that of Basques in the eastern part of the district of Navarre, whose capital was Pamplona, and this gave the Upper Frontier the character of a frontier province and Saragosa that of a frontier city.

A large number of Arabs, mainly Yamanites, and a very few Berbers had chosen to settle in this province, to whose numbers was added a considerable strength of local Spaniards who had embraced the new faith and become part of the brotherhood of Islam. Because there were very few Berbers in the region, the Upper Frontier was spared the ravages of the civil war in which Arabs and Berbers had bled each other almost to death in North Africa and Spain. Because of its distance from Cordoba the province enjoyed a degree of independence not available to other parts of the country. During two decades of Abdur Rahman's rule, while he was occupied fighting for the throne and crushing rebellions to left and right, Saragosa lived as an almost independent state run by local chieftains, many of whom were unscrupulous adventurers caring only for their personal ambitions. The loyalty which they offered to the central authority in Spain was no more than nominal, a formality without substance, and Cordoba had left the Muslims of the Upper Frontier alone not only because of distance but also because they were often engaged in skirmishes with the Franks and

1. Levy-Provencal: pp 76-77; Enan: vol 1, p 199.

2. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Espana Musulmana*: p 131.

3. Sanchez-Albornoz: *Espana Musulmana*: p 131; Enan: vol 1, p 199.



therefore were not to be disturbed. Moreover, there was nothing that Cordoba could do to impose its will upon the distant province because of the internal strife in which the capital was embroiled.

Of the men at the helm of affairs in the Upper Frontier, the most important was Sulaiman bin Yaqzan, known also as Ibn-ul-A'rabi. He was the governor of the province at the time and has been called Lord of Barcelona and Jerona. How he had come to be governor of Saragosa is not clear, but he was there, and, jealous to guard the independence of North-Eastern Spain, had organised a group of like-minded leaders who would act in conjunction with him to resist any attempt on the part of Abdur Rahman to impose a tighter rein on the Upper Frontier. The most eminent of his allies was Hussain bin Yahya, a descendant of Sad bin Ubada who had almost become the first Caliph of Islam after the death of Prophet Muhammad at Medina. Others cooperating with the governor were Abul Aswad, son of Yusuf the Fihrite, who had escaped from prison at Cordoba as described in Chapter 13, and an obscure chieftain named Abu Saur bin Qusai, who was administrator of Huesca.

These chiefs saw their independence threatened by the rising power of Abdur Rahman the Immigrant. As Yamanites they were naturally hostile to the new ruler of Cordoba, but they were not opposed to Umayyad rule only; they were equally averse to the re-establishment of Abbasid sovereignty over their province. What they wanted was to maintain the present status quo. They were planning a joint front against a possible invasion from Cordoba when suddenly "the Slav" appeared on the scene, brandishing the black standard of the Abbasids.



Caliph Mansur had learnt a bitter lesson from his abortive attempt to overthrow Abdur Rahman through the agency of Ala bin Mughees, whose severed head lying at the door of his tent warned him not to interfere in the affairs of Spain. He had got the point and taken no further action against the young Ameer. There is a reference in western writings to an exchange of ambassadors between Mansur and Pepin the Short, King of the Franks, supposedly initiated by the latter,<sup>1</sup> but this is unlikely and is not

1. Pidal: vol 6, p 418; Enan: vol 1, p 171.

mentioned by any early Muslim historian. It is inconceivable that a barbarian chieftain like Pepin would know enough about the Caliphate or the Abbasid-Umayyad tussle, or even about the niceties of diplomatic communication to undertake such an exchange.

Caliph Mansur died in 775 and was followed on the throne by his son, Muhammad al Mehdi. The young Caliph, undaunted by the failure of his father's attempt to change the government at Cordoba, took up once again the challenge of the Umayyad. He would work against Abdur Rahman through Qairowan, capital of North Africa, which was still ruled by kinsmen of Yusuf the Fihrite.

The man chosen by the Caliph was Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, son-in-law of Yusuf, and known to everybody as the *Slav* (Al Siqlabi). He was so called because of his appearance: tall, strong, red-haired, blue-eyed.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of 160 Hijri (late 776) he landed on the coast of Murcia (the district of Murcia was called Tudmir by the Arabs because Murcia did not then exist). Immediately upon landing on Spanish soil he sent out a call to all Muslims in the region to join him in a war against the Umayyad usurper and help him re-establish the rule of the rightful Caliph at Baghdad. The response to his call came mainly from the Berbers, of whom a large number had settled in the district, and before long the Slav had an army large enough to take the field.

He sent an invitation to Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi for a joint venture against their common enemy at Cordoba. Sulaiman was then visiting Barcelona and did not take kindly to the idea of another general entering the arena, possibly complicating the situation, possibly imposing Abbasid rule in the north of Spain which was no more welcome than Umayyad rule. He gave no answer to the invitation of the Abbasid general. The Slav took his silence as a sign of hostility and decided to beat Sulaiman into submission, thereby adding to his own stature in the campaign against Cordoba. He marched north with his Berber army. Somewhere between Valencia and Barcelona a battle was fought between Sulaiman and the Slav in which the latter was defeated. He fell back on Tudmir to lick his wounds.

We will take up shortly the fortunes of Sulaiman and his fellow conspirators. Before that, however, it would be expedient to dispose of the Slav, for he was not destined to play any part in the

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 18; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 55.



revolt of the north-east and the Frankish invasion to which it led.

The year following the Slav's repulse at the hands of Sulaiman, the Ameer advanced from Cordoba to put out the flames of the rebellion fanned by the Slav on the east coast of Spain. As the Umayyad army arrived in the vicinity of Tudmir, the Slav retreated into the mountainous region west of Valencia. Abdur Rahman destroyed all the vessels on the coast in order to prevent a possible escape of the Slav, and pressed against him in the mountains, but like Shaqna the Berber, some of whose followers may well have been serving under the Slav, the rebel remained safe in his mountain fastness. From here he waged a guerrilla war against the regular army of Abdur Rahman, ravaging the country side and causing alarm and despondency.

This state of affairs lasted a year, during which the Slav's capacity to hurt Abdur Rahman's cause did not weaken and the prospects of Abdur Rahman getting at the Slav did not get any brighter. At last, despairing of bringing his adversary to battle, Abdur Rahman turned to the well tried tactics of bribery and assassination. He announced a reward of 1000 dinars to anyone who would kill the rebel leader and bring in his head.

A Berber warrior named Miskhar, one of the trusted followers of the Slav, succumbed to the temptation. He chose a moment when the Slav was off his guard and killed him. He severed his general's head and carried it to the Ameer who promptly rewarded the traitor with a purse of 1000 dinars. Thus, in 162 Hijri (778), ended not only the life of Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb, alias the Slav, but also the one and only attempt by Caliph Mehdi to influence events in Umayyad Spain.<sup>1</sup>

With the failure of this ill-fated venture also came the end of the privileges, such as they were, of Atanogildo, the Gothic Count of Murcia and successor of the illustrious Count Theodomir, who had signed a treaty with Abdul Aziz bin Musa during the conquest of Spain and thereafter ruled over the seven districts of Murcia as a virtually independent lord. Many years after the conquest the

1. There is mention of Ameer Abdur Rahman thinking of sending an expedition to Syria in 163 Hijri, after he had finished with the Slav, with the intention of recovering the region from the Bani Abbas: and of his organising a large force but being prevented from carrying out the operation by events in the north-east of Spain (Pidal: vol 6, p 418). This for a man as down-to-earth as Abdur Rahman, seems unlikely, although he might have toyed with the idea as a pleasant day-dream.

Muslim governor of Spain, Abul Khattar, had married the daughter of Theodomir and, still later, upon the old man's death, inherited his vast personal property, leaving his successor as lord of the seven districts but with greatly reduced status and powers. (See Chapter 6).

Making a gross error of judgement, upon the arrival of Abdur Rahman the Slav, Atanogildo threw in his lot with the adventurer, in the belief that his mission would succeed, that the Umayyad prince would be overthrown and the country would come under the rule of the Abbasid Caliph. When that happened he, Atanogildo, would no doubt be generously rewarded.

That, of course, did not happen, and with the collapse of the Slav's rebellion and the death of the Slav, Atanogildo found himself left alone to face the victor's wrath. The vengeance of the Ameer was mild compared with what he had done to other rebel leaders, perhaps because Atanogildo was not really a rebel leader as such. He was removed from office, his seven districts were taken away to be administered by Muslim officers like other districts of Spain, and the Count was reduced to the status of an ordinary citizen, living in disgrace. The treaty with Theodomir was revoked.<sup>1</sup>



After the encounter with the Slav, Sulaiman returned to Saragosa and, seconded by Husain bin Yahya, raised the standard of revolt and renounced his allegiance to the Umayyad prince. They prepared for war, mustered their forces and strengthened the defences of Saragosa to resist a siege which they were sure would follow.

No sooner did the Ameer hear about the declared rebellion of Saragosa than he sent a force to deal with the rebels. The force was commanded by Sa'laba bin Ubaid, vizier of Abdur Rahman, who was instructed to crush the rebellion and after that remain in Saragosa as governor of the Upper Frontier. Sa'laba marched through Toledo and Tarrazona to approach the frontier capital from the west. He laid siege to the city.

What followed was a series of siege operations consisting of attempts to storm the city and sallies by the garrison to break the siege. There was heavy fighting but it remained inconclusive. After

1. Simonet; p 242.



a few days of such operations Sulaiman decided to attempt a surprise raid. The day's fighting had ended; the Umayyad forces had disengaged and pulled back from the gate which they had been attacking; back in their camp they had unburdened themselves of their weapons and relaxed their vigilance. At a moment when he was least expected, Sulaiman rushed out of the city with a mounted column and fell upon the camp. The Umayyads never found their feet. Their general was taken prisoner while the rest of them scattered in all directions.

This was a clear victory for the rebels and a serious setback for the Ameer. His commanding general was a prisoner, his army had been defeated and driven from Saragosa while the rebels had gained prestige at his expense. But the joy of the rebels was short-lived. The elation of victory passed and was replaced by a dread of what Abdur Rahman would do to them. They had no doubt that he would come in person with a stronger force and give them the same unmerciful treatment which he had meted out to other rebels. The fear of reprisals was so great in the rebel camp that the leaders decided to turn to the only power that they could think of to save themselves from the vengeance of Abdur Rahman.

The history of Muslim Spain is full of treachery and defection — Christian lords turning to Muslim princes for help against their co-religionists; Muslim chiefs seeking the aid of Christian lords against fellow Muslims. The first Muslim to betray Islam for personal ambitions was Munusa, whose story has been narrated in Chapters 2 and 3. The second was Sulaiman bin Yaqzan, Ibn-ul-A'rabi.

Sulaiman persuaded his fellow rebel chieftains to invite the Franks to Spain. Leaving Hussain bin Yahya as commander of the province at Saragosa and accompanied by Abul Aswad and Abu Saur, and with the captive general Sa'laba in tow, in the spring of 777 (Rajab-Sha'ban 160 Hijri) he journeyed across France to Paderborn in Saxony (now in the north west of West Germany) to meet with the King of the Franks. The king was called Carlos Magno by the Spaniards, Charles the Great in the language of this book, an is known to history as Charlemagne.<sup>1</sup>

1. Dozy (p 204) includes Abdur Rahman bin Habeeb the Slav in this delegation. This is incorrect. The story of the Slav is as narrated in this chapter. (As given by Muslim historians) and the journey to Paderborn has no place in it. In fact, the Slav did not play any part in the conspiracy to invite the Franks to Muslim Spain.

## 19: CHARLEMAGNE

Pepin the Short, the first Carolingian king of the Franks, died in 768. Before his death, as per Frankish custom, he divided his kingdom between his two sons — Charles and Carloman. Charles was an illegitimate child, like his grandfather Charles Martel, but some time after his birth Pepin had solemnised his marriage with Charles's mother. Now, after the succession, hardly had Charles settled down to ruling his half-kingdom when he was called to wage war in the south, in Aquitaine.

The story of Aquitaine and its numerous attempts to get and retain independence from the Carolingians has been briefly narrated in Chapter 3. Pepin the Short had beaten Aquitaine into submission, but following his death the territory rose again under Duke Hunald to throw off the yoke of Carolingian dominance. Now Charles marched at the head of a large army, defeated the duke and suppressed the rebellion. Hunald fled southwards and sought sanctuary with Lupo, Duke of Saxony, but Charles forced the latter to deliver the fugitive into his hands. Charles was not able to subdue Saxony and had to be content with a *pro forma* submission by the Duke of Saxony, which was a formality with little substance. However, Charles annexed Aquitaine into his kingdom. Since he already possessed Septimania, Provence and Burgundy, the southern boundary of his kingdom now rested on the River Garonne, the eastern Pyrenees and the Mediterranean. (See Maps 1 and 2).

Charles was a powerful man — powerful not only physically but also in his will to power and the driving ambition which characterised his struggles and which allowed no room for scruples. It was inevitable that there should be a clash of interest between him and his younger brother, Carloman. Egged on by his mother, Charles concluded an alliance with King Desiderius of the Lombards against his brother and even married the daughter of the Lombard king. However, before any further steps could be taken to remove the rival king from the throne, Carloman died, in 771, and Charles hastily marched into his brother's half-kingdom and made it his own, ignoring the rights of his nephews.

The widow of Carloman fled with her children to Lombardy, in the north-west of present Italy, and appealed to King Desiderius for help. The Lombard King broke his alliance with Charles and



put pressure on the Pope to intervene in the dispute and anoint the sons of Carloman as Frankish kings. Responding to this threat, Charles marched into Lombardy and seized its capital, Pavia, where he proclaimed himself "King of the Langobards."<sup>1</sup> His brother's children fell into his hands and "disappeared."<sup>2</sup>

Charles was destined to conquer extensive territories beyond his native Frankish borders and unify a large part of western and central Europe under one Christian Empire. After disposing of his father-in-law, Desiderius, and discarding his wife, the daughter of Desiderius, he turned north to deal with the pagan barbarians of Frisia (now Holland) and Saxony (the north-western part of present West Germany). The Saxons were one of the wildest barbarian nations and would prove the most tenacious of Charles' opponents for the next thirty years. While their nobles were willing to unite with the king of the Franks, the bulk of the nation felt otherwise and, led by their formidable chief Widukind, began a protracted war against the Franks in 772.

After five bloody years of warfare in the dark forests of North Germany, Charles gained his first major success against the Saxons. He wrongly believed that this was the last time that he would have trouble with these unruly people, but it was nevertheless a considerable achievement. Widukind had been driven from Saxony and forced to flee to Denmark where he was given shelter by a Danish prince, and the bulk of the Saxon nation lay prostrate before the Franks.

To celebrate the victory it was decided that a great gathering of clans would be held at Paderborn in Saxony. This gathering was an annual feature known as "May Field," held in the spring or summer, where royal edicts were promulgated and military expeditions planned. This year, i.e. 777, it would be held in May. At this gathering Charles would receive the submission of thousands of Saxons who would also enter the Christian faith and be baptised.

While this ceremony was under way, the Frankish court was startled to find the proceedings interrupted by the arrival of a delegation of Arabs from Spain, a people regarded by the Christian Franks as their traditional enemies. This delegation consisted of Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi, Abul Aswad, and Abu Saur — the rebel

chiefs who had come from Saragosa to seek the help of King Charles of the Franks, whom we will henceforth call by his historical name: *Charlemagne*.

Sulaiman proposed an alliance. He invited the Frankish king to invade Muslim Spain, just as Count Julian had invited the Muslims in North Africa to invade Christian Spain a half-century earlier. While the Arab leader may have offered Charlemagne the temptation of conquering the whole of Spain, in fact offering Spain on a plate, he made a definite commitment of the region of North-Eastern Spain, the province of the Upper Frontier. He urged the king to come in person with an expeditionary force and take possession of the province, in which venture he and his colleagues would render all possible assistance. He promised to deliver to Charlemagne many cities of Spain, particularly Saragosa, and to recognise his sovereignty over the country. As a further incentive, he warned the Christian monarch that the invasion of his territory by the Muslim Ameer was imminent and could be forestalled only by offensive action of his own. Finally, as proof of his loyalty, he delivered to Charlemagne the captive general, Sa'laba bin Ubaid, vizier of Cordoba.<sup>1</sup>

The prospect of an invasion of Muslim territory was pleasing to Charlemagne. There was peace in his kingdom. He had crushed, at least for the time being, his German and Slav neighbours to east and south-east, beyond the Rhine and the Alps and up to the River Danube. His vision of greatness, fired by strong religious sentiment, led him to imagine himself as the conqueror of Muslim Spain and restorer of Christianity in the Iberian peninsula. He knew of the civil war in Spain in which the Muslims had dissipated their strength in fruitless internal conflicts, thus providing a golden opportunity for an invader from the north. Furthermore, his military judgement showed him the distinct advantage of holding the Pyrenees and the Ebro, not only to prevent further incursions into his kingdom by the Muslims but also to exercise a degree of influence over the affairs of what remained of Muslim Spain.

Charlemagne accepted the proposal of the Arab chiefs. He would come with a large army in the following summer and do what had to be done. After coordinating certain matters of mutual interest, Sulaiman and his fellow chiefs returned to Saragosa. They had opened the door for the invasion of Muslim Spain by the most

1. The Lombards, one of the Germanic barbarian nations, were originally called "Langobard," which in their Germanic dialect meant "long beard."

2. Encyclopaedia Britannica: vol 4, p 44.

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1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 21; Akhbar Majmua: p 113; Levi-Provencal: p 81; Pidal: vol 6, p 428.



powerful Christian ruler of the time.

Preparations were begun by Charlemagne for a major invasion of Spain. His couriers rode to all parts of his empire to summon his subjects for what he thought would be a holy war. In addition to his own Christian subjects he was assured the help and good will of the Muslims in the north-east of Spain as well as the Christian Count Galindo of Cerdania in the Eastern Pyrenees. It was just as well to have allies in the zone of operations, and Charlemagne was hopeful that as a Christian monarch he would have the sympathy and support of the Christian Basques and Navarrese in the Western Pyrenees. This was wishful thinking.

Contingents marched from every province of his realm in response to the call of the king. They came from Austrasia, Burgundy, Bavaria, Lombardy, Septimania, Provence — all Germanic barbarian nations more interested in plunder than in the holy war. Over the months a considerable army was assembled in the province of Poitiers and was organised and prepared for a bold campaign against Islam. The final concentration area for the invading force was Chassenuil, between Poitiers and Bordeaux.

The army began its march from the concentration area on April 19, 778. It moved as one body up to the River Garonne, then split into two corps. One of these would cross the Pyrenees in the east and advance via Gerona and Barcelona; the other, commanded by the king in person, would move along the old Roman road over the western end of the Pyrenees and debouch into Navarre. After securing its capital, Pamplona, it would continue its march to Saragosa where it would rendezvous with the other corps.

Charlemagne marched through the pass of Ibaneta in the Valley of Roncesvalles and arrived at Pamplona, 25 miles away. There was no incident on the march; there was no incident at Pamplona, for the citizens of the provincial capital, mainly Navarrese with a few Basques, capitulated. Charlemagne received the submission of Pamplona as well as the keys of the city. The absence of conflict and the peaceful manner in which the city submitted encouraged the king to believe that the entire operation would be an easy triumph. From Pamplona he resumed the march to Saragosa, going via Huesca.<sup>1</sup>

He was now met by the Arab chiefs who were selling their

1. One account (Donde fue... Roncesvalles: p 36) says that the army probably crossed the Ebro and approached Saragosa from the west. This is unlikely because it would be an unsafe route to take, risking interference from hostile forces in the south. The route via Huesca (Pidal: vol 6, p 275) makes military sense and also makes for an easier and safer march.

country to the Christian monarch. They may have met him on arrival at Pamplona, may have met him on his way to Saragosa, or they may have come out of Saragosa to welcome him as he neared the capital. Accounts vary. But it is clear that Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi smoothed the path of the Christian army, facilitating its march and guiding it to its objective. With him were Abu Saur, administrator of Huesca, and the latter's brother and son, while in the company of Charlemagne was the captive general, Sa'laba bin Ubaid.<sup>1</sup>

The corps commanded by Charlemagne arrived in front of Saragosa and here was united with the second corps. The latter had marched through Gerona and Barcelona, which had made a token submission as directed by Sulaiman. It had then marched to Lerida and after that to Saragosa to rejoin the other half of the army.

It was at Saragosa that Charlemagne met his first reverse. It was as if he had stepped on a rake and it had risen and hit him in the face. The city would not open its gates to the Christians, as promised by their Arab allies. The Muslims had changed their minds.



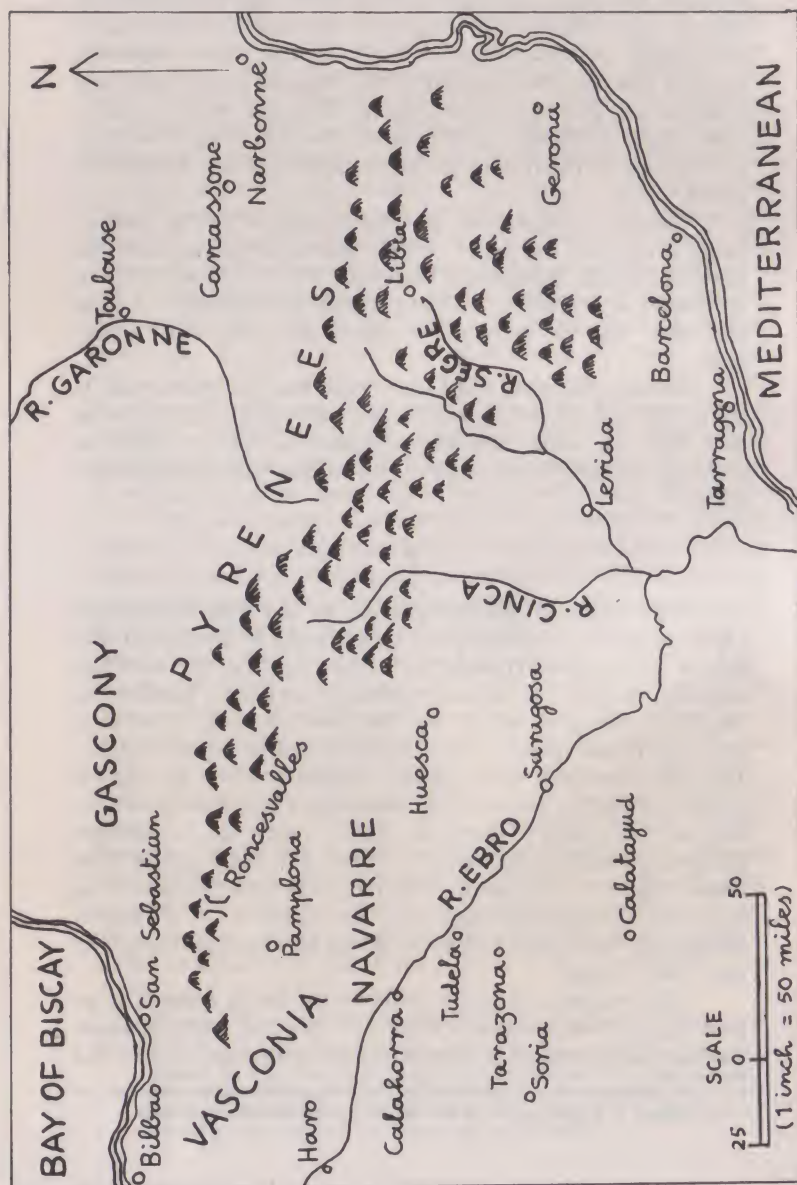
When Sulaiman left Saragosa to go and welcome his new Christian master, he left the city in the hands of his partner and second -in-command, Hussain bin Yahya. After the rebel chief had departed, on what the faithful regarded as an unholy mission, the Muslims in Saragosa decided that they were not going to sell their city to an infidel merely to spite the Umayyad prince at Cordoba. The new commander of Saragosa belonged to one of the noblest families of Madina and was descended from a man who could have been the first Caliph of Islam. He found it repugnant, as did other Muslims, to make a deal with the enemies of Allah against their fellow Muslims. Consequently, they refused to open the gates of the city. The Christian monarch was not welcome. If he wanted Saragosa he would have to fight for it, and he would get it only over their dead bodies.

Charlemagne was placed in the embarrassing position of an invited guest finding the door slammed in his face, while Sulaiman was just as embarrassed as a host bringing a guest home and finding

1. Sa'laba may have been delivered to Charlemagne at Saragosa on his arrival instead of a year earlier at Paderborn, as some writers have said.



MAP 5: NORTH-EASTERN SPAIN



himself locked out of the house. He urged his guest to take the city by assault, pointing out that the defenders would not be able to withstand a siege because of a lack of resources. Consequently, Charlemagne, unwilling to return without winning the prize for which he had come all this way, laid siege to Saragosa. It was now June 778.

Siege operations were commenced. The Christian and barbarian forces launched several assaults against the fortifications in an attempt to get inside the city, but the Muslims were fighting in the spirit of the holy war and put up a stout defence. Every assault was repulsed, every attempt to breach the defences beaten back. There was fierce fighting for many days as Charlemagne strove to storm the city, but he was no nearer success. The king of the Franks would have to settle down for a long siege in order to starve the defenders into submission, but, luckily for the defenders of Saragosa, he was not left to make that decision.

Couriers arrived from France to give the king the alarming news that the Saxons were on the warpath again. Widukind was back in the field; the Saxons were taking advantage of the absence of the king with his army and had ravaged the country up to the Rhine, even captured the city of Deutz, opposite Cologne. The empire was defenceless against the Saxons should they decide to cross the Rhine and carry the war into the home territory of the Franks.

Charlemagne was in a delicate position. Far from his home base, he was in alien country among an alien people whom he had believed to be his allies but who in fact were actively hostile to him. Added to this was the danger that the Ameer of Spain could take advantage of Charlemagne's isolation and advance against him from the south. If Abdur Rahman joined up with the Muslims in the Upper Frontier he could inflict terrible damage upon the invading Frankish army. This could have been a plot, thought Charlemagne; it could have been a clever design to lure him into a trap and destroy him.

The king's first reaction was to seize the persons of his Arab allies and hold them as hostages. They were the cause of his troubles, and, if he had nothing else to show for his pains he could at least display these distinguished Muslim chiefs as trophies of war. The chiefs were Sulaiman, Abu Saur, a brother and a son of Abu Saur and vizier Sa'laba, while a few other Arabs present with these chiefs also became the king's prisoners. His next action was a



vindictive one: he devastated the countryside around Saragosa and gathered a considerable booty to take back with him. Then he gave the order for the return to France, which was the most sensible thing for him to do. The return march from Saragosa began in July.

With the bitter taste of failure in his mouth, Charlemagne hastened his march. This time the entire army marched with him and would take the same road which he had taken on his inward journey, via Pamplona and Roncesvalles. On his way he picked up more loot from Huesca. Hurrying home to prevent disaster in his own kingdom, he was glad to think that there would be no opposition on the way to obstruct his return journey, certainly not at Pamplona whose Christian inhabitants had readily submitted to him a few weeks before.

In this he was mistaken. The Navarrese of Pamplona and the Basques who lived in the city had no greater love for the Franks than they had for the Muslims or, for that matter, any foreigner. They saw Charlemagne as an invader, as a foreign king who had been tricked by a people cleverer than himself and then repulsed under the walls of Saragosa, as a worsted general in retreat who was going back to face an even greater crisis when he got home. They prepared for action. They shut the gates of the city in his face, thus symbolically thumbing their nose at the king of the Franks.

Charlemagne was not going to let the Christians of Pamplona do to him what the Muslims of Saragosa had done. He launched a fierce attack against the town which proved completely successful. The Navarrese lacked the military organisation and skill of the Muslims, and those who were not killed in the town scattered in all directions to escape the brutal vengeance of the king, leaving the town to the tender mercies of his soldiers. The barbarians sacked Pamplona. As a final act of vengeance, Charlemagne demolished its fortifications and razed the town to the ground. His chroniclers tell us that he did this to discourage the Navarrese from further rebellion,<sup>1</sup> although he had no intention of coming this way again and, indeed, never did.

Little did Charlemagne know that by this wanton act of slaughter and devastation he had earned the painful retribution which awaited him in the Pyrenees Mountains to which he was now headed.



The road to France begins to rise gently some distance from Pamplona, through the southern foothills of the Pyrenees, and continues to rise till it gets to Burguete, which is the original capital of the district of Roncesvalles. Two miles on, the valley narrows and the gradient of the winding road becomes steeper. The valley is narrowest at the top of the pass, called the Height of Ibaneta, which stands 1062 metres above sea level, 26 miles from Pamplona. To left and right of the pass the ridges rise to crests 1300 to 1500 metres above sea level. Beyond Ibaneta the road descends through the Valley of Valcarlos, which is regarded as part of the long defile of Roncesvalles. The Muslims called the pass *Bab-ul-Shazri*. The Valley of Roncesvalles was later also named, by French writers, as Errozabal, Rozaballes and Rencesvals.

It was not a gorge through which men would have to struggle with one following in the steps of the other, as later romantic song-writers have presented it. It was narrow, nevertheless, and green and beautiful, and for an ambush as deadly a place as any, especially the last few hundred meters culminating in the summit of Ibaneta. Here a determined force lying in wait could play havoc with a tired and unsuspecting army toiling through the pass.<sup>1</sup>

Charlemagne was totally unmindful of the risks involved in taking a large army through the defile of Roncesvalles, where at places it would have to march almost in single file. He believed that this would be a normal march outside striking range of hostile forces. It was, after all, the country of the Basques and Navarrese, Christian people who could be expected to be sympathetic to his cause even if they had been brutally treated at Pamplona. The king did not appear to have the least suspicion that they were enemies, hating him with an implacable hatred, and they were not the only enemies he would have to worry about.

Unknown to him, Charlemagne had two enemies to reckon with, one Muslim and the other Christian. The Muslim enemy was a contingent raised hastily by Matruh and Ayshan, sons of Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi, to liberate their father from the clutches of the Christians. The two young men are believed to have asked Hussain bin Yahya for help in this venture and met with an encouraging response, not because Hussain bore any love for Sulaiman but because he was willing to do anything which would hurt the

1. This writer visited the place in August 1980 and had as his guide the Canon of the monastery-hospital built in the 12th Century in what is now the village of Roncesvalles.

1. Donde fue ... Roncesvalles: p. 37.



Christian invaders of Muslim Spain. The force raised by the sons of Sulaiman followed the Christian army, keeping out of sight and out of earshot, and while Charlemagne was busy with his punitive operations against Pamplona, it went on to the hills beyond that town to talk to the Navarrese and the Basques.

The other enemy was the Christian one: Navarrese and Basques, particularly the latter who were the wilder and more unruly of the two. The Franks took comfort in calling them thieves and brigands, but in their own barbarian eyes they were heroic defenders of their land and liberty — what we would now call freedom fighters. When not fighting Muslims they were fighting the Asturians; when not fighting Asturians they were fighting the Franks; and when not fighting the Franks they were fighting each other. They were against anybody and everybody.

The Basques had from the very start resented the penetration of their territory by the forces of the Frankish king. They had not obstructed the move of the Christian army because either they had not been prepared for it or they were willing to tolerate it if the Franks did not misbehave. But the Franks had misbehaved at Pamplona, playing havoc with the principal city of Navarre and shedding Basque and Navarrese blood. The Basques and the Navarrese, who had always hated the Franks, rose like a swarm of angry hornets, burning with the desire to punish the perpetrators of this atrocity and the violators of their liberty. Thus, when the Muslims got in touch with the Basques for joint action against a common enemy — action in which the savage courage of the Basques would be tempered and complemented by the disciplined order and military skill of the Muslims — they found willing ears to listen to them.

Some western historians have confused the history of this event by giving a bogus account of who was the enemy of the Franks in the operation that followed. Some, unwilling to accept the defeat of the Christian Franks of the Great King by the Muslims of Spain, say that the enemy was only the Basques. Others, recoiling from the thought that the Christian Monarch should be attacked by fellow Christians, insist that the enemy was only the Muslims. In actual fact it was both, Muslims and Basques, and this is acknowledged by modern western historians as well.<sup>1</sup> The two groups, whose strength we do not know, worked in conjunction with each other, the Basques helping the Muslims with their better

knowledge of the ground, the Muslims helping the Basques with their superior knowledge of military tactics.

In the Valley of Roncesvalles near the summit of Ibaneta, the avengers lay in wait. The place chosen by them included the ascent to the summit, i.e. the last few hundred yards below Ibaneta, the summit itself and a short distance beyond the summit. It was a narrow valley, covered with woods, at places with steep sides, at places rocky, offering all the concealment that an attacker could desire while restricting the freedom of action of any regular force trapped on the valley floor. The Muslims and the Basques took up their positions. They concealed themselves and waited patiently for their prey to set foot in their trap.<sup>1</sup>



The regiments of Charlemagne, having plundered the towns and villages through which they passed during the campaign, set out from Pamplona on August 12 or 13. Charlemagne organised his army for the march in two bodies: in front was the main body at the head of which the king marched in person; at the back was the rear guard, a purely Frankish force in which he placed all the baggage including the booty and the Arab hostages. The rear guard was a small division of the army and was commanded by the king's nephew, Roland, Warden of the Breton March (or Duke of Brittany). The Christian army swung merrily along the road, blissfully unaware of the disaster which awaited it.

Late in the afternoon of August 15, 778 (Zul Haj 16, 161 Hijri) the army was astride the pass of Ibaneta when it decided to stop. The bulk of the army, i.e. the main body, had crossed the summit and lined the road beyond it; the head of the rear guard was on the actual saddle of the pass; the rest of the rear guard was strung out behind the summit. The army would stop here for the night. The men lowered their burdens, and their guard, and began to settle down for another uneventful night. The baggage was dumped in the middle of the valley and the hostages located next to it, where they would be well guarded. The shadows lengthened. The men relaxed. Dusk drew near.

Then the enemy struck. They were on both sides of the valley,

1. Modern Spanish and French researchers have done some very useful research on the location of this ambush. The general consensus places it more or less as described above.

1. Levi-Provençal: p 83; Pidal: vol 6, p 276.



lurking behind the boulders and the bushes. With a great din they rose from their places of concealment, fired their arrows and threw stones at the tired and unprepared enemy beneath. Then, with blood-curdling yells, they swooped down the slopes and hurled themselves at the rear guard.

The Franks were better organised and better armed but strangers to this terrain and caught in a most vulnerable position at a most vulnerable moment. The Muslims and the Basques carried lighter armament, ideal for their purpose, had prepared the ambush thoroughly and taken full advantage of their better knowledge of the ground. The Franks were paralysed by the moral shock of the ambush and could not recover their balance. While many of them picked up their weapons and put up a brave fight, it was of no avail. The short and bloody clash that took place in the valley did not last long. Most of the soldiers of the rear guard were killed and only a very few escaped the slaughter to tell the sorry tale to their king. Roland was killed at the summit of Ibaneta, where an imposing stone monument now stands to mark his fall.

Then the light began to fade. In the gathering darkness the Basques fell upon the baggage dump, lifting everything which could be easily moved. This was not a matter of the Basques recovering what was their own and had been taken from them, but of brigands looting the baggage of the convoy most of which happened to have been looted earlier from their fellow Basques and Navarrese. It was a case of the looters being looted by other looters. The Basques melted away in the darkness and presumably took their dead with them, if there were any Basque dead. The Muslims, led by Matruh and Ayshan, liberated their father and the other hostages and returned in triumph to Saragosa.



The ambush was a disaster for the Frankish army. A considerable part of it was annihilated in the defile of Roncesvalles, with many corpses lying heaped at the summit of Ibaneta. Charlemagne had perhaps not killed so many people himself in the campaign as he lost in this ambush, and all the plunder which he had acquired to show his subjects on return, as a consolation for an otherwise useless and costly expedition, had been taken by the Basques, leaving the king nothing to show for his pains. It was a bitter king who received the shocking news of the calamity which

had befallen the rear guard and which had taken away its commanding general and many notable officers. But Charlemagne was a stout-hearted general. He returned speedily with a body of soldiers to the summit of the pass to survey the wreckage of the ambush.

What he did next is not clear. The history of this event has been distorted by legend and romantic epics written three centuries later to glorify and embellish the operation. Historians dealing with the subject have had to rely on 11th Century works like *The Song of Roland*, *The History of Turpin* and *A Guide for Pilgrims* — works whose historical value is comparable with the Arabian Nights. It appears that Charlemagne came to the scene of the ambush with the intention to fight, but there was no there to fight. It was dark, and the Muslims and the Basques had already put some distance between themselves and the pass. Beyond burying Roland and some of the dead and wishing he had never come to Spain, he did nothing. There was nothing that he could do.

A stone monument stands in the saddle of the pass where Roland fell, a beautiful monument which was constructed much later. There is a chapel in the present village of Roncesvalles, a mile below the summit, which is believed to have been built by Charlemagne to house the skulls and bones of the fallen warriors. The bones are still there and can be seen by visitors (like this writer). And not far from the chapel, there is a church and hospital, or hospice, called Real Colegiata, built in the 12th Century to help pilgrims coming from France to visit the shrine of Santiago in North-Western Spain.

Charlemagne marched back to France, nursing his wounded pride. It now all looked like a great trap into which he had fallen a willing victim, a cruel hoax which he had not been shrewd enough to see through. He had believed that he was coming to Spain as a great conqueror to receive a hero's welcome and would go on to subdue the whole peninsula. But it worked out very differently. The Muslims who invited him had drawn their swords against him. The Basques and the Navarrese, who he believed would submit to him and assist him, had not only turned against him but joined his other enemies in a highly successful ambush of his forces. Discomfited and humiliated, Charlemagne left the soil of Spain for his home territory. All that he had to show for his trouble was the captive general Sa'laba bin Ubaid, who was still a prisoner in his hands and who would, he hoped, fetch a grand ransom from the Ameer. In this



matter too the King of the Franks was in for a disappointment.

Charlemagne was a man of great stature, not only physically but also in terms of courage, will and military ability. Brushing off the setback at Saragosa and the loss of his rear guard at Roncesvalles, he launched himself into a fresh offensive against the Saxons. In a campaign which spanned the years 779 and 780, he inflicted a massive defeat upon the Saxons. Two years later the Saxons again appeared in strength and wiped out a French Army in Saxonia, but Charlemagne took the field once again and once again defeated them. In retaliation for the destruction of his army, he had 4,500 Saxon prisoners massacred in cold blood, in 782. Three years later the redoubtable chief Widukind surrendered to the Frankish king and was baptised. As part of his plan to render the Saxons incapable of further resistance, he had a large number of them deported to Frankish territory and in their place settled a large number of Franks in Saxonia. This did not, however, end their resistance which continued until the back of their power was finally broken and Saxonia permanently subjugated in 804.

As for his Arab hostage Sa'laba, he continued to languish in captivity. Abdur Rahman had no compunctions about discarding people when they were of no further use to him, and displayed total indifference to the fate of the vizier. Some time later, when he had given up his designs on Cordoba, Charlemagne himself opened negotiations with the Ameer. He proposed a truce and, according to one Muslim source, offered his daughter in marriage to Abdur Rahman. The Ameer declined the offer of marriage but accepted the truce.<sup>1</sup> He also demanded the return of Sa'laba, to which Charlemagne agreed, and the captive general was back again in Cordoba after his long captivity.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that Charlemagne was not serious about the truce and was using it only as a stratagem for securing the frontier with Spain until he was strong enough to defend his territory. In 781 he reorganised Aquitaine to include Narbonne, so the old duchy covered his entire frontier with Islam, and appointed his infant son Louis (later known as Louis the Pious) as its king. Then, in 785, he quietly sent a Frankish expeditionary force across the eastern extremity of the Pyrenees to occupy the city and district of Gerona, which it did. The Muslim governor of the city offered no resistance.

Charlemagne appointed a Frankish Count, Rostagno, as governor of Gerona to see that it remained part of the kingdom.

Abdur Rahman took no notice of this. Perhaps he regarded Gerona as part of Septimania rather than of Muslim Spain. Beyond this incident there was no activity in North-Eastern Spain to bring about a confrontation between the King of the Franks and the Ameer of Spain.

Charlemagne never again set foot on Spanish soil. Once was enough.

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 330.

2. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 21.



## 20: THE CONQUEST OF THE NORTH-EAST

While Charlemagne was busy with his futile expedition to Saragosa, the Ameer was occupied with the rebellion of Abdur Rahman the Slav in the region of Murcia and Valencia. The lack of concern shown by Abdur Rahman for the operations of the Franks in the north-eastern province of the realm was due to no masterly design of letting the Muslims of the Upper Frontier bleed the Christians to death, but to the simple fact that there was nothing that he could do. The Slav had tied him down with his raids and depredations. When at last he was able to rid himself of the Slav through assassination, a year later, the dead of Charlemagne's campaign were already cold in their graves.

The rebellion of the Slav ended in 162 Hijri. This was followed by a crop of minor insurrections which was a cause of irritation rather than a serious threat to the prince, but they kept him occupied nevertheless. There were five in rapid succession, four of them in what remained of the year 162 Hijri, which ended in November 779.

The first to rebel was Dihya al Ghassani, an Arab who had once been a close follower of Abdur Rahman but fell out with him and joined Shaqna the Berber in his long war against Cordoba. After the death of Shaqna, Dihya moved south, seized one of the castles in the district of Elvira and proclaimed his intention of carrying on the war. Abdur Rahman sent a column under one of his viziers, Shuhaid bin Isa, which cornered and killed the rebel. The second was a Berber, Ibrahim bin Shajra, who rose in Moron with his Berber followers but was taken by surprise and killed by Abdur Rahman's freedman Badr. The third was another Berber, Abbas, against whom the Ameer sent Tamam bin Alqama who killed the rebel chief and scattered his forces.

The fourth was a more interesting case, involving an Arab known as Qaid al Salami, or Commander Salami, who was a high official of the government and a trusted follower of Abdur Rahman. One night he had taken too much wine and under its influence tried to open the gate which led to the bridge over the Guadalquivir. While he was fumbling in the dark he was seen and stopped by a guard who sent him back to his house and his bed, to sleep off the effects of the alcohol. As he awoke in the morning, however, the memory of the event returned to haunt him. Fearing

the the Ameer would punish him for his misdemeanour, he left Cordoba in haste and rode to Toledo, where he declared a totally unnecessary rebellion against his erstwhile master.

The ragtag army raised by Salami was large enough to merit serious counter measures, but not large enough to require the presence of the Ameer. So Abdur Rahman sent a division under Habeeb bin Abdul Malik to deal with the insurgent. The Umayyad general arrived at Toledo and laid siege to the city, but hardly had the siege begun when Salami emerged from the city to throw a general challenge for single combat. From the government side a black slave, who was one of their best fighters, was sent out in response to the challenge. The two champions began to fight and fought for a long time before both fell mortally wounded. The rebel general died of his wounds soon after, and that was the end of his revolt.

These four revolts took place in the year 162 Hijri, although the fourth one probably overlapped into 163. It was followed by the last of the rebellions in the south, the author of which was an Arab named Al Rumahis bin Azeez al Kinani, who had been chief of police of Marwan bin Muhammad, the last of the Umayyad Caliphs. With the fall of the Umayyads he had wandered for a while and eventually made his way to Spain where Abdur Rahman, ever generous to old servants of the dynasty, made him administrator of Algeciras. Now Rumahis, after living in obscurity for many years, suddenly declared himself in open revolt against Cordoba. This happened in 163 Hijri. He seems to have been extremely casual about the response of Cordoba and took no urgent measures to prepare against it — a carelessness which can only be ascribed to stupidity.

Abdur Rahman determined to punish the man's disloyalty in person and led a fast column to Algeciras. So fast was his move and so inefficient the security measures of Rumahis that the latter got no warning of the former's approach. Rumahis was in his bath when a slave rushed in with the alarming news that the Ameer's cavalry was in the courtyard of the house. There was no time to dress. The ex-policeman wrapped a blanket around him and made a dash for the coast where he boarded a vessel and sailed away to North Africa, whence later he travelled to the east. Abdur Rahman entered the rebel's house to find that the bird had flown.



After the repulse of Charlemagne at Saragosa and his ignominious treatment at the hands of the Basques, the province of the Upper Frontier continued to be ruled by Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi and Hussain bin Yahya. The former was apparently the senior and more prominent of the two, and the province was apparently at peace with the Ameer, though how the transition took place from rebellion to loyalty is not clear. Abdur Rahman made no attempt to put a bridle on the north-east, the most unstable province of his unstable realm.

The partnership between Sulaiman and Hussain was an uneasy one and lasted only two years. Then, early in 164 Hijri (which began in September 780) Hussain plotted against his senior colleague. Seeking an opportunity when his victim would be unaware of danger, he had him attacked in the great Mosque of Saragosa where he had gone for the Friday prayers. His assailant stabbed him to death. Ayshan, son of Sulaiman who had liberated the father from captivity at Roncesvalles, fled to Narbonne to escape a possible assassination attempt against himself, and Hussain assumed total power over the Upper Frontier without having to share authority with anyone. He was now sole ruler of the province, and as sole ruler of the province declared his independence of Cordoba.

Abdur Rahman prepared for action. The last of the rebellions in the south had been crushed. His new professional army of 40,000 was ready for action — an army of mercenaries personally loyal to the Ameer but caring little for the country in which they fought. The Ameer was free to devote himself to the problem of the north-east, and with his new army felt strong enough to impose his rule on the turbulent frontier province. With that end in view, later in 164 Hijri, he marched at the head of his army and laid siege to Saragosa. He also sent a few detachments commanded by his sons into the countryside to round up any rebels they found, and a few days later these detachments returned to report that all had submitted and all were willing to remain loyal to the central authority of Cordoba.

Not many weeks had passed when Ayshan, son of Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi, also returned to Saragosa. He had heard that the city had been invested by the Ameer and felt that it was now safe to come back. Soon after his return he was able to waylay his father's assassin and kill him, and having thus redeemed his honour by avenging his father's blood, he offered his services to the Ameer.

Abdur Rahman accepted him in service, since he was the enemy of the enemy, and let him stay with the army as a minor chief.

Hussain bin Yahya now realised how isolated he really was. The only support he had was within the city and there was no way of getting any more help from the rest of the province. Consequently, he offered to make an honourable submission. Abdur Rahman had no reason to doubt Hussain's profession of loyalty and accepted his submission. He even appointed Hussain as Cordoba's governor of the Upper Frontier, but as a precaution he took the new governor's son, Saeed, as a hostage. A few days later Saeed slipped away and fled to the Balearic Islands, but Abdur Rahman did not look upon the escape as part of a plot by the young man's father.

The problem of Saragosa was solved, at least for the moment. It was mid-summer of 781 (approaching the end of 164 Hijri); and there were many months of good campaigning weather left. It was time for Abdur Rahman to deal with the Christians of the north-east, to punish them for not being good subjects of the Muslim state and to make sure that they behaved better in the future.



Since taking power at Cordoba a quarter century before, Abdur Rahman had had neither the time nor the resources nor the peace of mind to deal with the Christians of the north. But now the troubles which had plagued him were over, or appeared to be so, and he had a fine new army at his command. At last he had the time and the resources to turn his attention to a people whom he would make his future Christian subjects. The ease and speed with which he carried out his next campaign speaks well for the mobility of his army and his own skill in manoeuvring it.

Abdur Rahman first turned west and marched along the south bank of the River Ebro into what is now the province of Logronio, and conquered Calahorra and Viguera. He met resistance at several places which he easily overcame, and at every place he destroyed the fortifications so that the inhabitants would not again rise in revolt. Then he crossed the Ebro and advanced to Pamplona, whose citizens capitulated upon his arrival. The Navarrese and the Basques were fully subjugated, though not before his fast columns had tracked down defiant Christian groups in the mountains and



beaten them into submission.<sup>1</sup> Abdur Rahman took hostages to assure himself of their good behaviour and appointed a Muslim Governor of Pamplona.

Then he turned east and marched along the southern foothills of the Pyrenees to the eastern reaches of the mountain range where the most important principality was Cerdania. This was ruled by Count Galindo Belascotenses, a man called Ibn Balaskut by the Muslims, who had earlier declared his support for Charlemagne.<sup>2</sup> This nobleman, probably a Gothic lord, opened his gates to the Muslims. Abdur Rahman accepted the count's submission and took his son as hostage.<sup>3</sup>

This was as far as Abdur Rahman went. He had subdued the entire north-eastern region of Spain, from the land of the Basques in the west to the eastern end of the Pyrenees. All had yielded to him, paid the *jizya* and pledged to continue paying it. All had delivered hostages to the Ameer as a guarantee that they would remain good subjects of the realm. Some time in the autumn of 781 (early 165 Hijri) Abdur Rahman began his return journey to Cordoba. He would make no further incursions and conduct no further operations in the north. There is, however, mention of an expedition launched by the governor of Toledo into Asturias in 168 Hijri (784-785), during the reign of King Mauregato "son of the captive Moorish women" — which returned laden with spoils and captives.<sup>4</sup>

While Abdur Rahman was operating in the north-east, a civil war was raging between the Berbers of Santaver and the Berbers of Valencia. The cause of this war is not known, nor the result, except that a large number of Berbers from both sides fell in the bloody conflict. Abdur Rahman was not concerned with this war, perhaps even glad to see it in progress so that his potential enemies would wear themselves out fighting each other. However, on his return from the north-east of Spain he seized 36 prominent Berbers at Santaver, including the chief Hilal whom he had befriended at the

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer (vol 6, p 22) mentions certain places and certain chiefs defeated by Abdur Rahman but the names are distorted and cannot be transcribed to known places and historical figures.
2. He has also been called Galindus Blasquez (Levi-Provencal: p 124).
3. Pidal (vol 6, p 277) refers to another Christian chief by the name of Jimeno el Fuerte (the Strong) who submitted to the Ameer.
4. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 26. Christian accounts make no mention of this raid and maintain that there was unbroken peace between the Christians and the Muslims during the reign of Mauregato. See Chapter 17.

end of his long war against Shaqna al Fatmi and whose son Daud had assassinated Shaqna, and locked them up in prison in Cordoba. Their fate thereafter is not known.<sup>1</sup>

Upon his return to Cordoba Abdur Rahman also disposed of Ayshan bin Sulaiman who had fallen out with him. Ayshan had attempted to kill the Ameer but was overpowered and slain, and his body was crucified on the bank of the Guadalquivir.<sup>2</sup>

A year passed and the problem of Saragosa came to life again. The son of the governor of Saragosa, who had escaped from the Ameer's camp and made his way to the Balearic Islands, returned to the city and rejoined his father. The loyalty of the father to the Ameer also lasted one year. In 166 Hijri (which began in August 782) Hussain bin Yahya again rose in revolt and gathered his forces for a trial of strength, should Cordoba make another attempt to impose its rule on the Upper Frontier.

Abdur Rahman recalled how easily he had forced the rebels of Saragosa to submit the last time. He did not believe that the rebels would be any stronger than before and there would therefore be no need for the Ameer's presence to bring them to their knees a second time. Consequently, he sent a division under a general named Ghalib bin Tamam bin Alqama to break the resistance of Saragosa and bring the rebel chief to Cordoba.

Ghalib marched to Saragosa, and as he neared the city Hussain came out to fight him in the open. A battle was fought somewhere outside Saragosa at which the rebels were defeated and driven back, while a number of their officers were taken prisoner, including Hussain's son Yahya. Ghalib sent the captives to Cordoba where all were beheaded. He also moved up to the walls of the city and commenced a siege which lengthened into a stalemate. Hussain had prepared his defences well and stocked the city with ample provisions to withstand a protracted siege.

Abdur Rahman could see that Saragosa was a tougher nut to crack than he had imagined and he took more serious measures to deal with the problem. He prepared a larger force to take the capital of the Upper Frontier and even had 36 catapults constructed for battering the walls of the city and shattering its defences. In the following year, 167 Hijri (beginning in August 783) he marched in person to deal with the rebels of the north-east.<sup>3</sup> The city was

1. Akhbar Majmua: p 113.
2. *Ibid*: p 115.
3. According to some, this operation also was concluded in 166.



pounded by the Ameer's engines from several directions. After it had been softened up, the catapults concentrated at one place to create a breach in the defences through which the Ameer's troops poured into the city. Saragosa was taken by assault and the rebellion crushed.

Hussain and many of his officers were brought before Abdur Rahman. All were executed. The fate of Hussain was particularly gruesome: his hands and feet were chopped off, and after he had suffered for some time he was bludgeoned to death.<sup>1</sup> Following the cruel execution of their chief, all the Medinese in Saragosa were exiled to a village three miles away as punishment for their act of rebellion. Some time later, however, as an act of clemency, the Ameer permitted their return to the city.

Saragosa had rebelled for the last time against Abdur Rahman. It would not trouble him again.

## 21: THE LAST OF THE FIIHRITES

The first and most powerful enemy Abdur Rahman had to face in Spain was Yusuf the Fihrite. He was the most powerful because he was the government of Spain when Abdur Rahman was nothing more than a fugitive and a pretender to the throne. It took all the cunning and tenacity at Abdur Rahman's command to defeat him and eventually eliminate him from the scene. Seeing Yusuf nailed to a cross in front of the palace, along with his son Abdur Rahman, was a joy for the new Ameer, the successful culmination of two years of bloody struggle.

In different circumstances peace could have prevailed and relations bettered between the Umayyad prince and the Fihrites, but the harshness with which Abdur Rahman treated Yusuf and with which he continued to pursue his enemies made peace impossible. The bitter memory of the humiliating fate of their governor could not be erased from the minds of the clan. The Bani Fihri were a distinguished clan, one of the noblest clans of the Quraish of Mecca, the clan which had produced some of the most notable generals of the holy war, particularly in North Africa and Spain.

After the death of Yusuf, the Fihrites had risen again under Hisham bin Uzra at Toledo (see Chapter 14) and although they were again defeated, the embers of hostility had not died. They were kept alive by Yusuf's son, Mohammad Abul Aswad, who had escaped from prison at Cordoba shortly before his father's and brother's death. As other Fihrite chiefs lost and faded away, Abul Aswad assumed the leadership of the clan and kept its hopes alive. One day, he believed, the Bani Fihri would rise again and vindicate themselves, redeeming their honour and reclaiming their power.

For some years he remained a rebel at large. Fortune seldom smiled on him. Then he threw in his lot with the rebels of the Upper Frontier and made common cause with Sulaiman Ibn-ul-A'rabi and Hussain bin Yahya. He even travelled to Paderborn in Saxony in company with Sulaiman to seek the assistance of the Frankish King and invite him to Spain. After the failure of Charlemagne's expedition to Saragosa, Abul Aswad again remained at large, though what he did and where he went is not known.

Seven years later, at the beginning of 169 Hijri, he made a bid for power. He gathered around him, in the east of Spain, a

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 57; Dozy: p 207.



considerable force composed of Fihrites, Qaisites, Berbers, dissidents, adventurers — all enemies of the Umayyads, and marched to Toledo which became the focus of the movement. Finally, he felt strong enough to advance on Cordoba and deal with Abdur Rahman in his own capital.

The Ameer did not wait for him. He set out from Cordoba to meet his adversary on the way. Abul Aswad had hardly crossed the River Guadalimar (Arabic: Wadi-ul-Ahmar) when Abdur Rahman arrived upon the scene. The two armies went into camp beside the town of Castellon, 20 miles north-east of Jaen just before the Guadalimar becomes one with the Guadalquivir. It was here that the two forces formed up for battle, Abul Aswad with his back to the Guadalimar which was then flowing deep and strong. For a few days there was nothing more than skirmishing, each side probing the other to get its measure. Then came the day of battle, September 11, 785 (Rabi-ul-Awwal 1, 169 Hijri) between the polyglot force of Abul Aswad and the well-knit mercenary army of the Ameer.

It was one of the hardest battles fought by Abdur Rahman, in spite of the fact that he had already subverted one of the generals of Abul Aswad, the commander of the rebel right wing. As a result of the treachery of their general and also because of good fighting by the mercenary warriors, the battle ended in total victory for the Ameer. 4000 rebels were slain and many more died by drowning in the Guadalimar as they fled from the battlefield. Abul Aswad retreated northwards while Abdur Rahman came in hot pursuit, cutting down a large number of stragglers until he had got to Calatrava (near the present Ciudad Real) where the pursuit ended. Abul Aswad went west to Caceres with the remnants of his army while Abdur Rahman returned to Cordoba. There would be no more fighting this year.

At Caceres, Abul Aswad regrouped and reformed his force. His army was dwindling; his men were losing faith in him. But he had a sufficient strength of warriors left to encourage him in his determination to continue opposition to the Umayyads, and undeterred by past failures, he prepared for another trial of strength. This took place in the following year, 170 Hijri (786-787).

Abdur Rahman marched to Caceres, but there was no battle. As the advance guard of the Ameer arrived upon the scene, what remained of the once formidable army of Abul Aswad melted

away. The fast columns of the Ameer pursued and killed many rebels in their flight but Abul Aswad again got away, this time by plunging into a marsh where he was able to evade his pursuers.

Abul Aswad disappeared from view once again. He was now a homeless and friendless refugee, a broken and defeated man who had lost all hope of winning a place for himself in Spain. A few months later, still in 170 Hijri, he died quietly in the village of Rakkana in the district of Toledo. He was the last of the chiefs big enough and strong enough to threaten Umayyad power in Cordoba.

Shortly after his death, his brother Qasim, probably the last surviving son of Yusuf the Fihrite, made a pitiful attempt to rally the rebels against the Ameer. This happened in Toledo in the closing months of 170 Hijri. Abdur Rahman once again marched against the rebel but there was no fight. Hardly had the Ameer arrived at Toledo when Qasim submitted. He walked into the Ameer's camp without an escort or safe conduct, and was promptly executed.

This was the last of the rebellions against Abdur Rahman. The Ameer was now an old man and had only a few months of life left to him.



## 22: FRIENDS AND KINSMEN

Abdur Rahman was destined not to lack enemies. When it was not the Fihrites it was the Yamanites; when not the Yamanites it was elements of Qaisites or Berbers or sundry other groups out to resist the new strong man trying to impose a new central authority on the country. And when it was not any of these enemies, whom he expected to act like enemies, it was his own friends and kinsmen, for Abdur Rahman had a way of making enemies which ensured that there would always be plenty of them. His own treatment of his supporters, which often contrasted with his habitual generosity of spirit, alienated them and drove them to hostility. Many of those who had helped him to power and those whom he had helped to enjoy a position of affluence in his realm were to fall out with him.

The first of these was Abdullah bin Khalid, son-in-law of Ubaidullah bin Usman — the two chiefs who had invited him to Spain and prepared the ground for his coming. In the rebellion of Abu Sabah, chief of the Yamanites, which took place in 149 Hijri (766), Abdullah bin Khalid, then a vizier, was used as an intermediary to bring the old chief to Cordoba under a safe conduct, which was dishonoured by Abdur Rahman. The Yamanite leader was assassinated in the presence of the Ameer. Abdullah bin Khalid was so shocked by this violation of principle that he retired from service and swore never to have anything to do with the government. He died in obscurity.

Tamam bin Alqama was the first of the Muslims in Spain to greet Abdur Rahman. He had landed on the coast of North Africa to convey the pretender to Spain and Abdur Rahman had drawn from his name an omen of victory. Tamam became his first Hajib, commanded several expeditions against rebel armies and served the Ameer with unstinting loyalty. In the end, however, Abdur Rahman forgot the services rendered by Tamam and he fell into disfavour, deprived of honour and position. What he suffered in the time of Abdur Rahman was a minor blow compared to what was to follow. His son, along with the son of Ubaidullah bin Usman, was executed by Abdur Rahman's son and successor, Hisham. Alluding to this event, the historian Ibn Hayyan says: "The execution of the two youths, ordered as it was by the son of the man to whom their lives ought to have been most precious, well convinced their

disconsolate fathers of the truth, that no one has a right to expect praiseworthy deeds from his own kindred. Indeed, if we compare the fate of those who were the principal instruments of Abdur Rahman's success, and who gave him the empire, with that of those who resisted his authority and were subdued, we shall find that the fate of the former was the more lamentable and severe of the two."<sup>1</sup>

The greatest of his supporters, Ubaidullah bin Usman, chief of the Umayyads in Spain, who was the main author of the campaign to establish Umayyad rule in the country, had the right to expect the highest honour from the man whom he had made Ameer of Spain. Indeed, he was the first one to be appointed Vizier and acted as a high-ranking general in the Ameer's army. He commanded one of the major expeditions against Shaqna the Berber, during which his nephew Wajeih defected to the side of the Berber rebel and was later assassinated on orders of Abdur Rahman. Thereafter Ubaidullah also fell from grace and was totally ignored by the Ameer.

After many years of living in obscurity in his castle at Torrox in the south of Spain, during which period he felt keenly the injustice of his position, Ubaidullah made a bid to attract the Ameer's attention while at the same time showing his contempt for the ruler. He persuaded his own nephew to rebel in one of the castles in the district of Elvira. Abdur Rahman sent an armed group to the site of the revolt which captured and beheaded the rebel. The date of this event is not recorded in history but would be a year or two after the end of Shaqna's rebellion in 160 Hijri (777).

Ubaidullah then took a bolder step. In 163 Hijri (779 - 780) he seduced Ubaidullah bin Aban, nephew of Abdur Rahman, to rise against the Ameer, painting a glowing picture of the nephew replacing his father's brother on the throne of Spain. This young man conspired with an uncle, Abdus Salam bin Yazeed who went under the name of Al Yazeedi and who was a cousin of the Ameer. The two of them took into their confidence a number of officials who were willing to see a change of masters. They plotted to assassinate Abdur Rahman in his palace. Before the deed could be done, however, a servant who was in the know of the plot revealed it to Badr.

Abdur Rahman was not in the palace. He was out hunting.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 45; Gayangos: vol 2, p 91.



Badr sent a fast messenger after him to inform him of what was going on. The Ameer at once sent two detachments of soldiers under trusted officers to arrest the two princes, which they did. Upon his return to Cordoba Abdur Rahman had every member of the conspiracy arrested, and when all were in the bag he had them executed, including his cousin and nephew. He knew that old Ubaidullah bin Usman was up to his neck in the plot, that he was the mind behind the conspiracy, but out of regard for his position as king-maker and for the services rendered by him, he spared his life. Abdur Rahman said, "I shall inflict on him a chastisement worse than death."<sup>1</sup> His punishment was total indifference on the part of the ruler; but it is believed that Abdur Rahman later relented and reinstated the man in rank and favour.

These were not the only near relatives who rose against Abdur Rahman. Most of the fleeing survivors of the house of Umayya who had come to Spain and had been received with warmth and kindness by the new Ameer were grateful and contented. But there were others — ambitious and impatient to share power — who were open to seditious temptation to conspire against the head of the clan. The next one to rise in revolt was Mugheera bin Waleed, another nephew of Abdur Rahman, who plotted against him along with Huzail, son of the late Sumail bin Hatim, who wished to avenge the murder of his father by Abdur Rahman. Before the conspirators had got very far with their plot they were discovered, and both Mugheera and Huzail were put to death on the orders of Abdur Rahman. This was the last of his kinsmen to plot against him, and this happened in 167 Hijri (783-784).

Abdur Rahman was profoundly saddened by this latest demonstration of disloyalty and ingratitude on the part of his own family — a family for which he had done so much. Shortly after the execution of Mugheera, a servant who enjoyed his confidence entered the Ameer's chamber to find him lost in thought and obviously in deep sorrow. Seeing his trusted servant, Abdur Rahman said, "It is a wonder to us, how, after all our endeavours to place these people in a situation of security and comfort, and after risking our life, until God, whose motives are a mystery, was pleased that we should carry our purpose, they should be so ungrateful as to array themselves in arms against us. They come to this country, fleeing from the swords of our enemies; and yet, when we receive them with open arms, and give them a share in the

empire which God destined for us alone, and when we grant them security, and surround them with every comfort and luxury, they stir their arms, inflate their nostrils, fancy themselves superior to us and try to resist that power which the Almighty has placed in our hands! But God has chastised their ingratitude by permitting us to pry into their secrets, and by turning against them the blows which they aimed at us."<sup>1</sup>

After a few minutes of thought Abdur Rahman continued, "The worst of my problems in this brother, father of that wretched fellow. How can I be at ease in his company after the execution of his son and the violation of a blood relationship? How can my eyes meet his? Go to him at once and explain the position to him. Here are 5000 dinars. Give them to him and persuade him to go away from me to whatever place he chooses on the other bank."<sup>2</sup> The other bank meant North Africa... the other bank of the Strait of Gibraltar.

The servant conveyed the message and the money. Brother Waleed made his excuses, blaming his son who, he said, had concealed from him his seditious activities against the Ameer. He promised to leave at once, which he did, with his family and possessions, to settle down in North Africa.

The servant returned to the Ameer and told him what his brother had said. "His words," observed Abdur Rahman bitterly, "do not deceive us about what is in his mind. If he had the power to drink my blood he would not hesitate an instant to do so. Praise be to Allah who has given us success in what we intended for them and has thwarted their designs against us."<sup>3</sup>



The most tragic of the estrangements, and which occurred towards the end of his reign, was that of Badr — loyal servant, faithful ex-slave, constant companion, staunch friend — who had spent a lifetime in attendance on the prince.<sup>4</sup> He had suffered hardship and privation for the sake of his master as no one else had done. He had shared with him the dangers of the flight and the

1 Maqqari: vol 3, p 44; Gayangos: vol 2, p 90.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 49; translation of Gayangos (vol 2, p 84).

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 47.

3. *Ibid*: pp 47-48.

4. The year of the events described in the following pages is not noted anywhere in history, but has to be the last three years of the reign of Abdur Rahman.



pursuit, the loneliness of his wanderings, the hunger and want of his fugitive years in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Africa and the Maghreb. He had carried with the prince his part of the burden of misfortune and tragedy. His step had never faltered, his loyalty and devotion had never weakened. But for him Abdur Rahman would probably not have survived the perils of the Abbasid pursuit or the hazards of his journey over three continents.

It was Badr who opened for Abdur Rahman the door of Spain, organising support for him and doing the groundwork for his coming. In a way it was he who laid the foundations of the new kingdom of which Abdur Rahman was the first ruler. He fought innumerable battles for his prince and commanded more expeditions than anyone else against the enemies of the Ameer. He even saved him from assassination. Badr grew old in the service of his master and rose to a position of honour and wealth which he fully deserved. With age and honour came assurance, a feeling of a special relationship with the Ameer which went to his head, for he was a man of lowly birth who had risen to a position of a high ranking general and a high official of the court. With pride of position came an insolence bred of familiarity which jarred on the finer sensibilities of the prince and of which his rivals did not hesitate to take advantage.

Badr was getting old. He had spent the last thirty years in the saddle and on the march and no longer felt young and energetic enough to go on doing the same. The Ameer would speak of campaigns to be conducted and of Badr carrying on the good work. Badr would make excuses. He would at times complain of his burdens, often remind the prince of the services he had rendered, and now and then even speak in a familiar and disrespectful tone, which was the result of confidence and assurance. Badr was, after all, Badr.

One day he went too far. He said something out of place, for an ex-slave, even one risen to eminence. Abdur Rahman was not the man to continue making allowances for past services; indeed it was more in his nature to throw unwanted and bothersome passengers overboard. His anger exploded. He immediately ordered Badr's dismissal from office, confiscation of all his property and his confinement in his house in Cordoba. Badr was stunned. He was suddenly reduced to the level of a penniless nobody, a prisoner of the Ameer. Worse than the loss of status and deprivation of property was the fact that this was a blow from Abdur Rahman,

one so close and so dear, one with whom he had always had a special relationship.

He bore his sufferings in silence for some time. Then the injustice of his situation became unbearable. He wrote to the Ameer: "I should have thought that, after crossing the sea, and traversing the deserts, in order to procure you a kingdom, you would have rewarded me otherwise than by thus humbling me in the eyes of my equals, and giving matter of cause for the malicious joy of my enemies, making me poor and destitute, and no longer useful to my friends, causing those who honoured and esteemed me to keep aloof, and those who hated me to hate me the more. I verily think that had I fallen into the hands of the Bani Abbas, I could not have been worse treated by them than I have been by you. But God is over all things, and to him we must all return."<sup>1</sup>

Abdur Rahman went over the letter. It made him very angry. He wrote to Badr: "I have read your letter, which is proof of your ignorance, your improper mode of address, your vileness of thought. It is strange that while wishing to establish special bonds with us you come up with something that destroys those very bonds." The letter included a rebuke and admonishment to Badr to behave himself.<sup>2</sup>

Badr was devastated. He had expected pity, if not justice. He began to lose hope. Everyone had turned away from him, as if from one diseased who must be avoided. But he continued to write to Abdur Rahman, now pleading, now accusing him of ingratitude, often thoughtless about what he said. At last, in despair, he wrote: "My imprisonment has been very long, my sorrows and worries have doubled. Perhaps you will order a release of my possessions so that they can be mine during my exile. I will play no role again in any position of authority nor exercise any power so long as I live."<sup>3</sup>

Abdur Rahman's response was another hard letter and another harsh rebuke. There would be no change, no relief, no release of goods. Badr would continue to suffer the punishment inflicted on him by the Ameer.

Badr bore his misfortunes for some more time. Then came the festival of Eid, a day of rejoicing and celebration in which every body enjoys the happy festivity and reunion with family and

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 40, translation of Gayangos (vol 2, pp 89-90).

2. *Ibid.*

3. Maqqari: vol 3, p 41.



friends. Badr had no family and no friends. The celebration of the Eid by others made him feel his position even more acutely and showed him what he really was: a sad and lonely old man, forsaken by all, living without hope and without all that he had earned in a lifetime of service. He wrote once more to the Ameer, made one more piteous appeal for mercy, for a betterment of the conditions of his life.

This was to be his last letter to his master. This time Abdur Rahman ordered his banishment from Cordoba and his despatch to a far flung post on the frontier. Abdur Rahman's letter to Badr, informing him of his exile, ended: "I know that you have been complaining to so and so and so and so. Your greatest enemy is your tongue which has led you astray more than anything else. Restrain it, before it destroys you."<sup>1</sup>

Badr was exiled to some outpost of the realm on a distant frontier and lived the rest of his life in pitiful conditions of poverty and neglect. On the same frontier, in the same wretched conditions, some time later, the faithful old soldier-servant breathed his last. Without him Abdur Rahman would probably not have lived beyond his early youth; he certainly would not have become Ameer of Spain.

### 23: ABDUR RAHMAN AND CORDOBA

Towards the end of his reign Abdur Rahman became a popular figure in Cordoba. He was known to everybody in the city, for he moved about freely among the citizens, mixing with his subjects, joining them in their celebrations and attending their funerals where he would often recite the funeral service. He would visit the sick and comfort them. He would join the faithful at the Friday prayers and the prayers for the Eid festivals, at the end of which he would ascend the pulpit and address the congregation.

He always dressed in white and wore a white turban on his head. He dressed with simplicity and dignity. He was a fine figure of a man — tall and erect, his proud carriage bearing witness to the powerful physique which he had enjoyed since his early youth. Even in his late fifties he was a good looking man with a fair skin, blue eyes, fine eyebrows, long brown hair and beard now turning grey with the years. Somewhere on his long journey through a lifetime of campaigning he had lost one eye — no one knows how and where — and this was the only blemish on an otherwise strikingly handsome face. He had no sense of smell.<sup>1</sup>

He would grant audiences regularly to the public where he would listen to their grievances and see to the solution of their problems. Any of his subjects could see him, anyone with a complaint could approach him and ask for an injustice to be undone. The weak would turn to him for help against the strong, and he would lose no time in redressing the wrongs which came to his attention. When not receiving the people in his palace he would go rambling about the city to find out for himself how his subjects were being treated and how they felt about his government. He never ate alone. When it was meal time he would invite anyone present, even a suppliant, to join him at his table.

It was not always so. This easy mixing with the people came during the closing years of his reign when most of the opposition had been crushed and he was firm in the saddle. But such free movement was not without danger, for there was no lack of enemies and ill-wishers, and this was brought home to him one day when he had gone to attend the funeral of a citizen of Cordoba.

He was returning from the funeral, mounted on his horse, when he was accosted in the street by an impudent fellow who said

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 37; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 48; Maqqari: vol 1, p 332.

1. *Ibid.*



to him, "May Allah prosper the Ameer, your *Qazi* (judge) has wronged me and I seek your help in redressing in wrong."

"If what you say be true," Abdur Rahman assured the man, "your wrong shall be redressed."

He urged his horse forward but the man seized the bridle of the horse. He said "O Ameer, I beseech you in the name of Allah not to move from his spot until you have ordered your *Qazi* to do justice in my case, for there he is beside you."

Abdur Rahman was angered by this encounter. The man could be lying, he could be guilty and fully deserving of the unfavourable judgement delivered by the judge. If he were to order the judge to reverse his decision it could lead to a miscarriage of justice and could compound a wrong. Abdur Rahman looked about for his guards. There were very few of them present and none close enough to intervene. Fearing to get embroiled with a possibly violent hoodlum, he reluctantly ordered the *Qazi* to do justice in the case of the persistent fellow. The man then released his grip on the bridle of the horse and the Ameer resumed his journey home.

Back in the palace, where everybody had come to know about the incident, one of the officials of the court who had always disapproved of the Ameer's wanderings in the city and feared for his safety, approached him about the matter. "May Allah Most High preserve the Ameer," he said. "These frequent ramblings do not become a powerful Sultan like you, for once the eyes of the common people get accustomed to the sight of you, all respect and awe will vanish."<sup>1</sup>

Abdur Rahman saw the wisdom of this advice and discontinued his practice of wandering about the city. He deputed his son Hisham to represent him at funerals and public gatherings, and after that Hisham carried out these functions.



Abdur Rahman used title of *Ameer* and refrained from calling himself by more imposing titles like *Sultan* or *Malik* (king). The word Ameer was normally used to denote a prince or a military commander, but in this case it signified neither more nor less than king, which is what Abdur Rahman was. He never assumed the title of Commander of the Faithful, even if he had struck the name of the Abbasid Caliph from the Friday sermon and substituted it with

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 37; Gayangos: vol 2, pp 87 - 88.

his own, because in spite of disagreement and disputes there was a certain respect in the hearts of the Muslims for the central authority of the Caliph who was known in the entire world of Islam as Commander of the Faithful. It was not till two centuries later that the 8th Umayyad ruler of Spain Abdur Rahman III, assumed that title.

Among his intimates he was known as Abu Mutarrif, or Father of Mutarrif, while according to some accounts he was called Abu Sulaiman, after his eldest son, and even Abu Zaid, another of his sons.<sup>1</sup> He had 11 sons and 9 daughters. History knows him as Abdur Rahman al Dakhil — the Immigrant — because he was the first of the Umayyad princes to enter Spain. An illustrious enemy referred to him as the Falcon of the Quraish, about which more will be said in the next chapter. His signet ring bore the inscription: "In Allah Abdur Rahman puts his trust and to Him he turns,"<sup>2</sup> and according to another source: "Abdur Rahman content with the will of God."<sup>3</sup>

Very little is known about the administrative organisation of the state under Abdur Rahman. Before him the Muslim governors had administered the land as a province of the region of North Africa, which in turn was one of the largest states or viceroalties of the empire of the Caliph. They had imported to Spain the administrative system of Syria, organising the entire country into districts (Arabic: *qura*) under administrators known as *walis* or, for smaller districts, *amils*. Before Abdur Rahman there were four provinces in Muslim Spain, namely Cordoba, Toledo, Merida and the Upper Frontier, the latter having its capital at Saragosa. Abdur Rahman continued the arrangement with the districts functioning under control of provincial governors and the provincial governors taking orders from the central authority at Cordoba. The Ameer was, however, free to deal directly with the districts if and when he chose to do so.

For his cabinet, or chancellory, he had *viziers* (ministers) and *hajibs*, the latter being major domos or court officials dealing with protocol and ceremonial matters. Among his viziers were, at some time or another, Ubaidullah bin Usman and his son-in-law Abdullah bin Khalid, the original sponsors of Abdur Rahman in Spain ... Shuhaid bin Isa who was a grandson of a Berber or Greek

1. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 37.

2. Maqqari: vol 3, p 54.

3. Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 48.



slave taken captive in one of the earlier wars of Islam ... Abdus Salam bin Busail al Rumi, also descendant of a Greek warrior-slave ... and Asim bin Muslim, a dashing stalwart who was the first to plunge into the River Guadalquivir on the eve of the Battle of Musara, Abdur Rahman's first battle in Spain. Among his hajibs were Tamam bin Alqama who has been mentioned at several places in this book ... Yusuf bin Bukht, chief of the clients of the Umayyads... Abdur Rahman who was a son of the famous Mughees al Rumi who had conquered Cordoba while serving under Tariq bin Ziyad in the first Muslim invasion of Spain... and Mansur the Eunuch — the first eunuch to attain high office in Spain under the Umayyads. The viziers and hajibs did not act as a cabinet or as heads of departments. They were used as generals or officials or secretaries to carry out orders or supervise the implementation of actions planned and directed by the Ameer. Abdur Rahman would leave nothing to others, he would do everything himself.<sup>1</sup>

His most innovative organisational contribution to Spain was the new army which he raised to fight his battles and maintain his peace. He first felt the need for an army totally loyal to himself during the battles against the Yamanites when he became disillusioned with his fellow Arabs. He had found them disloyal, undisciplined, unruly and untrustworthy. Consequently, he recruited a large force of Berbers from North Africa whom he attracted to Spain by generous pay and good living conditions, and augmented this force with warrior-slaves including a considerable number of white warriors captured by Muslims in battles in the north of Spain and the south of France. This army, consisting of more than 40,000 men and organised and trained to perfection, was blindly loyal to its commander-in-chief and used by him to win his victories against the rebels during the last decade of his reign.<sup>2</sup>



Like his Umayyad ancestors in Syria, Abdur Rahman had a passion for building and indulged this passion to the extent that his preoccupation with war would permit. Even when engaged in hostilities he would take time off during quiet periods to attend to the architectural improvement and beautification of Cordoba, and to a lesser extent of the rest of Spain. Work on construction continued even as his armies marched and counter marched.

He had several mosques built in the provinces, as also castles, baths, roads, and bridges. He embellished Cordoba with loving care. He provided its citizens with an abundant supply of water by bringing water by means of an aqueduct from the foothills of the Cordoba range north of the city. He rebuilt the bridge over the Guadalquivir which had been badly damaged by a flood in 162 Hijri (778-779). He surrounded the city with a protective wall. Such walls had existed in the past from Roman and Gothic times, and it is known that Governor Samh bin Malik (100-102 Hijri/719-721) carried out extensive repairs to the walls of Cordoba. What Abdur Rahman probably did was to realign and rebuild it in a better manner.

All this was done while the country was still in turmoil with rebel chiefs raising the standard of revolt in every quarter. When their heads had been cut off, when most rebellions had been crushed, when peace had returned to the country and Abdur Rahman was firmly on the throne with almost no challenger left to dispute his authority, his building zeal bloomed even more brightly. This happened in about 167-168 Hijri (783-785), when all the rebellions save that of Mohammad Abul Aswad the Fihrite were in the past, when the prince had another four or five years of life left to him.

Abdur Rahman built himself a new palace in Cordoba on the site of the old one where the governor of Spain had lived in the past. This was within the walls of the city, on the bank of the Guadalquivir, next to the old Cathedral of St Vincent. He used it as his living quarters as well as his headquarters where affairs of state were conducted.<sup>1</sup>

Abdur Rahman also built for himself a magnificent new residence two miles north-west of the city, on the bank of a stream at the foot of the hills, which he called Munyat-ur-Rusafa (Garden of Rusafa) after the country villa of his grandfather Hisham near Qinassareen in Northern Syria where Abdur Rahman had spent most of his childhood. This spacious building was surrounded by a splendid garden beautified by the finest flowers and plants which could be procured anywhere.<sup>2</sup> Abdur Rahman's sister

1. This palace may have been built earlier. We have only one reference (Levi-Provencal: p 88) to the year of construction: 168 Hijri (784-785), but this could be incorrect.

2. Nothing remains of Abdur Rahman's magnificent palace, but at the site where it stood the Spanish government had built a beautiful *Parador Nacional*, or state inn the likes of which dot the Spain of today. This hotel, resting on a gentle lower slope of the Sierra de Cordoba from where it affords a perfect view of the valley of Cordoba, has been given the name of Rusafa.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, p 45; Ibn Izari: vol 2, p 48.

2. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 268; Maqqari: vol 3, p 37.



Umm Asbagh, who had facilitated his escape from Syria and who was still living there, sent him exotic plants from the east, including peaches and a rare variety of pomegranate called *Safari*.<sup>1</sup> It was while he was walking in this garden one day that Abdur Rahman saw a solitary palm tree the sight of which filled him with nostalgia and made him homesick. Being a poet, he recited a few extempore verses comparing himself with this palm, whose original seed had germinated in the deserts of the east but which now stood, like himself, alone and apart from his kind in a foreign land replanted in foreign soil.<sup>2</sup>

Abdur Rahman's most lasting contribution to the architectural beauty of Cordoba was the Grand Mosque which has endured through more than twelve centuries to this day and is still known as "La Mezquita." It was to be the principal temple of Muslim Spain till 1236, when it was converted into a cathedral by order of King Ferdinand III, after the Christian reconquest of Cordoba. Abdur Rahman would not live to see the completion of the pious project, but for the story of this mosque we must go back to the beginning of Islam in Spain.

When the Muslims conquered Spain under Musa bin Nusair and Tariq bin Ziyad in 711-714, they followed the custom of Abu Ubaida and Khalid who had conquered Syria in the time of Caliph Abu Bakr. The latter had established the tradition of dividing the principal church of a conquered city between the Christians and the Muslims so that half of it would be available to the followers of each religion. Both Christians and Muslims prayed in the same temple of God, each community using its own half of it. This was done in Spain too. During the time of Governor Abul Khattar (743-745) the Cathedral of St Vincent at Cordoba was divided between the two communities, half being taken over by the conquering Muslims and half remaining in the hands of the conquered Christians. Some other churches in and around the city were demolished.<sup>3</sup>

Over the half-century that followed, the population of the Muslims in Spain rose by leaps and bounds as Islam spread to all parts of the country. The Christians were respected as "People of the Book," as were the Jews also, and were free to practise their religion with no burdens to carry other than a nominal tax called

the *jizya*. Nevertheless, there were large scale conversions to Islam with the result that during the later years of Abdur Rahman's reign there were more Spanish Muslims in Spain than Arabs and Berbers put together, particularly in the south and east of the peninsula.<sup>1</sup> (These local Muslims of Hispano-Roman and Visigothic origin were known as *Muladis* (Arabic: Muwallid).

The Spanish population which remained Christian lived in comfortable communities in all cities, the most prosperous of which were Toledo, Cordoba, Seville and Merida. These Christians living under Muslim rule were known as Mozarabes (Arabic: Musta'rab). The Christians lived and worshipped in their own churches according to their own religious rites. The Metropolitan, or Archbishop, of Christian Spain had his seat in Toledo while there were bishops in every major city to look after the flock. The appointment of all these senior ecclesiastical officials had to be approved by the Umayyad ruler at Cordoba.<sup>2</sup>

This was a matter of good fortune for the Christians of Spain, as for the Jews, living under Muslim rule — a fortune they did not share with the pagan barbarians of Western Europe who were ruled by the Christians. It was the law of Charlemagne that after surrender every Saxon had to be baptised, and those not baptised would be put to death. He converted his Saxon prisoners on pain of death, but so lightly did Christianity sit on these new converts that they later revolted and returned to the worship of idols.

Such a ghastly fate did not befall the Christians of Spain who were free to live as they wished, believe as they wished and worship as they wished, with life and property secure — more secure than under the Gothic rule which preceded the arrival of the Muslims in the country. This happy and peaceful state of Christian life in Muslim Spain was in sharp contrast with the state of the northern zone of the country reconquered by Alfonso I, who wiped out all traces of the new religion in the towns and villages which he took and which he razed to the ground.<sup>3</sup>

As the population of the Muslims in Cordoba increased, their half-mosque became too small for them. They were overcrowded. They constructed wooden galleries in the mosque, running below the ceiling, to take the increased numbers of the faithful, and this solved the problem for a while. Then even this proved insufficient.

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 456; Gayangos: vol 2, p 86.  
2. Ibn-ul-Aseer: vol 6, p 37; Maqqari: vol 3, p 54.  
3. Maqqari: vol 1, p 560.

1. Levi-Provencal: p 46.  
2. *Ibid*: p 48.  
3. *Ibid*.



As the number of worshippers swelled, the galleries sagged under their weight and yet there was not room enough for all. Moreover, the doorway of the mosque, which had once been large enough for the congregation of Muslims, was found to be too small when two generations later the number of Spanish Muslims in the city had surpassed that of the sons and the grandsons of the conquerors.

Abdur Rahman decided that the Muslims needed the entire building for themselves, on the site of which to construct a large *Jame* Mosque. In 169 Hijri (785-786) he sent for the leaders of the Christian Community and asked them to sell him their portion of the temple. Since the Christians were assured possession of their half by treaty, it could not be taken away. They had to be asked; and they refused to sell. After some bargaining, however the Christians agreed to sell their portion to the Muslims for 100,000 dinars, provided they were also granted permission to rebuild the churches in Cordoba which had been earlier demolished. These were the conditions under which the Muslims took over the entire Cathedral of St Vincent.<sup>1</sup>

It took a year to demolish the old structure and complete plans and preparation for the construction of the new mosque. This construction was begun in 170 Hijri (786-787). Work was still in progress two years later when Abdur Rahman died, after having spent 80,000 dinars on his mosque.<sup>2</sup> His son Hisham completed the mosque and after him several Ameer added to it until it had become the largest covered mosque in the world, and one of the most beautiful.

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 60; Dozy: p 239.

2. Maqqari: vol 1, p 9; Ibn Izari (vol 2, p 58) puts the sum at 100, 000.

## 24: THE FALCON OF THE QURAISH

Before his death in 172 Hijri, Abdur Rahman, as a wise monarch ruling over an unstable nation, had already settled the issue of succession to the throne. The purpose of this was to avoid a bloody scramble for power, and although there was trouble after his death, it was not half as serious as it would have been had the old king not nominated his heir in his lifetime.

He had two sons to choose from, viz Sulaiman, the eldest, and Hisham, his second son. Sulaiman was born in Syria four years before the flight of the prince from the banks of the Euphrates. He continued to live in Syria until things had settled down for Abdur Rahman in Spain. Then the Ameer sent for his son and thereafter he lived in the new country with the father. Hisham was born in Spain, the year after Abdur Rahman took Cordoba, of the slave girl Hualal presented to the young prince by the daughter of the vanquished Yusuf. Sulaiman was 42 and Hisham 31 at the time of Abdur Rahman's death (by lunar reckoning each was a year older).

The difference between the two princes was more than one of age alone. They were entirely different men. Sulaiman had missed a proper education because of the conditions prevailing in the east following the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty. After joining his father, when he was probably in his early teens, he had had no opportunity to catch up on his education, nor does he appear to have been very anxious to do so. He was mentally lethargic and indifferent to such subjects as literature and Arab history, subjects dear to the cultured Arab's heart. What is more, he was content to remain so.

Hisham, on the other hand, was intellectually and culturally an active man. Having received a sound education under the guidance of the Ameer, he had grown up to take a lively interest in statecraft, warfare, literature and history. It was about these topics that father and son would talk when they were by themselves. They would indulge in recitation of poetry, a pastime still popular in the better Muslim families all over the world. Abdur Rahman would recite a verse and Hisham had to tell who the author was and come up with another, and so they would go on, to the joy and delight of both. Apart from his high mental calibre, Hisham had a deep religious faith. He was a pious and devout Muslim and this earned



him the affection and respect of those who knew him and served under him.

With Sulaiman things were quite different. The father would try to draw him out, get him interested in important matters of politics and war, but he tried in vain. Sulaiman's interests were trivial; he seldom had anything worthwhile to say. One day when father and son were together, Abdur Rahman recited a famous verse of a famous poet and asked Sulaiman if he knew who its author was. "Some Arab probably," the son replied. "I have better things to do than commit to memory the verses of an Arab."<sup>1</sup> The father fell silent, hurt and disappointed, but he had already made up his mind as to who was going to inherit the kingdom after him. The decision was the best one that he could have taken.

Abdur Rahman openly and publicly proclaimed Hisham as heir to the throne. There was not a murmur from Sulaiman, or from any of his supporters. The matter was settled: after Abdur Rahman the ruler of Spain would be Hisham.

Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, founder of the Umayyad Dynasty in Spain, breathed his last on Rabi-ul-Akhir 24, 172 Hijri (September 30, 788). He was 57 and had ruled Spain for 32 years and 5 months. He was buried in the garden of his palace in Cordoba after a funeral which was attended by the entire population of the city. The funeral service was read by his son Abdullah.

Sulaiman and Hisham were not present. The former was in Toledo as governor while the latter was in Merida, also as governor. Their brother, who was known as Abdullah the Humble<sup>2</sup> and would later be called Abdullah the Valencian,<sup>3</sup> at once assembled the inhabitants of the city and took from them an oath of allegiance to Hisham as Ameer. He then sent a fast messenger to call Hisham from Merida. Hisham rode with all speed to Cordoba and took the reigns of power in his hands as the second Umayyad Ameer of Spain. The story of his life and campaigns will be narrated in a later volume.

The west has been unfair to Abdur Rahman, emphasising his cruelties and overlooking his virtues and achievements. Dozy, one of the most notable Arabists produced by Europe, has spoken of him as "... this treacherous, cruel and vindictive tyrant ... no honourable man would enter his service."<sup>4</sup> Not only is the

statement uncharitable but it is also factually incorrect, for there were plenty of honourable men in the service of Abdur Rahman.

The conduct of a historical figure has to be judged by standards of behaviour prevailing in his age and in his part of the world. It cannot be judged against a background of late 20th Century human rights ethics which were not relevant twelve centuries ago. An attempt to measure an 8th Century monarch with a 20th Century yard stick would neither do him justice nor serve the cause of history. Moreover, he has to be judged in comparison with personalities of his time, especially those who compete with him in the estimation of history. Such a personality was Charlemagne, king of the Franks and Emperor of Rome, his contemporary and his only great contemporary in the west.

Western writers have said the nicest things about Charlemagne. They have extolled his virtues and hailed him as the first great ruler of Christian Europe. Yet this was the man who coveted his own brother's throne and conspired with the king of the Lombards to unseat him, judiciously marrying his Lombard ally's daughter to gain his support ... who, when his brother died before, the conspirator's plans could be put into effect, pounced upon his kingdom and captured and put to death his brother's children in order to eliminate them from the scene... who drove his father-in-law from his throne and made himself king of Lombardy ... who had thousands of Saxons, who were fighting for their land and their liberty, massacred in cold blood while in captivity ... who, although crowned as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope in the year 800, was a polygamist (which would not have mattered if he had been a Muslim!) ... who never lost his coarse manners through a long and successful reign as king and emperor... who remained illiterate to the end, despite going to bed with pen and paper under his pillow in the hope that the knack would come to him in his sleep. In the matter of treachery and brutality, compared with Charlemagne, Abdur Rahman was a lightweight. Charlemagne was undoubtedly a man of gigantic stature, one of the greats of history who altered the course of events in Western Europe, but while giving him his due we must also give Abdur Rahman his.

At an age when he was hardly out of his boyhood he had to flee for his life and fight for survival against the forces of the rising Abbasid power. For five long years he trudged the burning sands of many deserts, alone and friendless, suffering hardships and facing

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 334.

2. Ibn Khaldun: vol 4, p 270; Abdullah *al Miskeen*.

3. Ibn-ul-Ascer: vol 6, p 37; Abdullah *al Balansi*.

4. Dozy: p. 208.



perils which would have crushed a lesser man. At 25 he landed on the coast of Spain to face in battle nothing less than the government of the country. After defeating the forces of the government by stratagem and manoeuvre as well as hard fighting, he was to spend the next thirty-two years of his life exchanging blows with enemy after enemy, fighting for his existence and for his newly acquired throne. He fought just about everybody — Fihrities, Yamanites, Qaisites, Berbers, Christians, even his own friends and kinsmen. He challenged the bravest and most cunning of his adversaries, out-fought and out-witted them, tricked the tricksters and made the tallest of them look like midgets.

If fortune smiled on him, it did so grudgingly. He had hardly taken off his armour after one battle when another challenger would rise to draw him out of his repose. Not one rebel chief raised the standard of revolt but Abdur Rahman took up the challenge and marched boldly against him. With unflagging zeal and inexhaustible energy he battled against all odds, advancing with sure footsteps to establish himself in Spain and create a kingdom for his descendants to rule. Undeterred by perils close at hand, he marched on, as if guided by a distant star, to keep his rendezvous with destiny.

His opponents had shattered the cohesion of a once compact Muslim Spain. The Arab and Berber warlords who led their tribal armies were concerned with personal ambitions and narrow factional interests rather than the good of the Muslim brotherhood or the strength and prosperity of the Muslim state. They fought not for something, but against something, namely a strong central authority. Blind to the dangers of internal conflict, blinder still to the looming menace of the Christian north, the warring factions were breaking Spain into pieces, causing a fragmentation of the Muslim state which would hasten the process of Christian reconquest.

Abdur Rahman went on to vanquish all these enemies. He surmounted all obstacles in his path and arrived at the point which destiny had chosen for him. At last fortune smiled. His labours were rewarded, his efforts crowned with success. On his long journey to survival and conquest he had to use every weapon at his hand — the sword, stratagem, treachery, assassination. Stratagem and guile have been part of warfare since time immemorial and will continue to be so as legitimate means to desired ends. Treachery and assassination, however, are heinous crimes, unacceptable and

unforgivable in Abdur Rahman's case as in all others. Some might argue that these are weapons of policy which have been in practice to this day even between civilized nations and that Abdur Rahman's enemies were themselves treacherous and unscrupulous men who would have done to Abdur Rahman what he did to them. Be that as it may, the image of Abdur Rahman was tarnished by such acts and he will have to live in history with this blot upon an otherwise shining record of accomplishment.

His unkindest cut was the one he delivered to his faithful Badr. No man has been under greater debt to another than Abdur Rahman was to Badr for his survival, for the journey to the scene of his life's achievements, for every success and attainment. He owed all to Badr, the ex-slave, the companion, the helper and advisor, the general. Badr was everything to him, his right-hand man, and gave everything to the prince, even offering his life. He had a right to expect that in his old age, after a lifetime of service and sacrifice, he would be liberally rewarded with riches and honours. But the treatment meted out to him by the prince was, to say the least, shabby. It does Abdur Rahman no credit.

Yet, Abdur Rahman was not without mercy. At times, moved by his own sensitivity or humour, he would forgive if not forget. It is related that he was once returning from an expedition against some rebels, mounted on his horse, with the rebel chief, bound in chains, sitting disconsolately on a mule not far from him. The Ameer moved his horse closer. He tapped the head of the mule with his cane and said, "O mule, what a load you carry of mischief and discord!"

The captive Arab looked for a few moments at the Ameer's horse, then he said, "O horse, what a load you carry of mercy and compassion!"

Abdur Rahman let him go. "By Allah," he said, "You shall not taste death by my hand."<sup>1</sup>



In the end he was the all-conquering, all-victorious, all-powerful king of Spain. He unified Spain. He brought together the feuding and turbulent factions of Arabs and the brooding and rebellious tribes of Berbers into one community, though not with total or lasting success. He conquered all but a narrow strip in the

1. Ibn Izari: vol 2 : p 59.



north-central and north-western parts of the country where barbarian kings clung to an independent, if wretched, existence. Had Abdur Rahman lived longer, it is not fanciful to imagine that he would have eliminated this pocket of discord also and brought the entire peninsula under the sway of Islam. He established his own dynasty at Cordoba which would reign in glory and splendour for 2½ centuries — a long dynastic period by any reckoning. He laid the foundations of Umayyad rule in Spain upon which his successors would build one of the most resplendent cultures of Muslim history, indeed of European and human history. He earned for himself a place as one of history's extraordinary military and political figures.

A clear and vivid portrait of Abdur Rahman's character and ability is drawn by the 11th Century historian, Ibn Hayyan. According to him, Abdur Rahman "... was a man of sound judgement and quick perception ... deeply learned, he was eloquent in speech and could express himself with facility and elegance ... he was slow and prudent in his deliberations but firm in putting them into effect ... he was free of all weakness, quick in his responses, prompt in his actions ... he would not lie in repose or abandon himself to indulgence ... he never entrusted the affairs of government to anyone else but administered them himself, yet consulting in difficult cases with people of wisdom and experience ... he was a brave and intrepid warrior, always the first in the field ... he was terrible in his anger and could bear no opposition to his will ... he was exceedingly liberal and well-versed in the science of government ... he was a good poet and could compose verses extempore ... he was, in short, a beneficent, generous and munificent prince."<sup>1</sup>

This is a sound judgement, if a bit eulogistic. But the finest compliment ever received by Abdur Rahman the Immigrant was paid him by his rival and arch enemy, Abu Jafar al Mansur, the Abbasid Caliph at Baghdad, who had strained every nerve to dethrone and destroy the Umayyad prince. In many ways the two were alike, in spite of their mutual hostility. Both were men of resolution and will, of prudence and sagacity, with a talent for government. Both were perceptive and far-sighted, possessing the energy, skill and courage to defeat all their enemies, to severely chastise their rebellious subjects and to acquire a firm grip over the territory they ruled. Both laid the foundations of glorious and enduring empires (although Mansur was the second, not the first of

the Abbasids); each of them was the first "great" of his dynasty. Both were men of outstanding intellect and culture. Both had put nephews to death, Mansur having executed the son of his brother Al Saffah. Both had Berber mothers.

Mansur would often think about Abdur Rahman. No matter how much he hated his distant adversary, he grudgingly admired him and made no secret of his admiration. While talking with his companions he would frequently mention Abdur Rahman, praising him for his enterprise and courage, his boldness in throwing himself into a distant land without friends and family. The Caliph lauded him for his success in overcoming all opposition, in skillfully turning his enemies against each other and becoming the sole master of Spain. "Lo," he would say, "that youth is a true champion; those who praise him do not lie."<sup>1</sup>

One day the Caliph sat among his courtiers in his palace at Baghdad. He was in a mood to talk about historical personalities. "Tell me," he said, "who among the rulers deserves to be called the Falcon of the Quraish?" The Quraish were the principal tribe of Mecca to which the Holy Prophet and all early Muslims belonged, including the Bani Umayya and the Bani Abbas, clans respectively of Ameer Abdur Rahman and Caliph Mansur. All the rulers in Islam up to this time had been from the Quraish.

The courtiers, being good courtiers, gave what they thought would be a welcome answer: "You yourself, O Commander of the Faithful. You have vanquished all kings, put an end to all upheavals, demolished your enemies and stamped out discord."

"You have said nothing," replied the Caliph. By this he meant that the were absolutely wrong in their answer.

"Then Muawia," the courtiers suggested. This was Muawia bin Abi Sufian who as governor of Syria had rebelled against the rightful Caliph Ali and established a separate Caliphate at Damascus. After the death of Ali by assassination he had become the ruler of the entire Muslim world as the first Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty.

"No," said the Caliph.

The courtiers thought for a while, then ventured another guess: "Abdul Malik bin Merwan." This Abdul Malik was one of the greater Umayyad caliphs who had ruled the Muslim world from 685 to 705. He was known for his political skill and judgement.

1. Maqqari: vol 1, p 331; Gayangos: vol 2, p 82.

1. Maqqari: vol 3, pp 37, 49; Gayangos: vol 2, pp 87, 93.



Mansur again shook his head. "You have said nothing."

The courtiers gave up trying. "Then who, O Commander of the Faithful?" they asked.

The Caliph began: "Muawia had succeeded because his path had been smoothed by (Caliphs) Umar and Usman and because he had his clan behind him. As for Abdul Malik, he had the backing of a powerful faction."

"The Falcon of the Quraish is Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, who traversed the deserts, crossed the sea and plunged all by himself into a land unknown to him, where he established his kingdom, subdued the frontiers, exterminated the mischief-makers and humiliated the most powerful of rebels. He made the cities prosperous, organised armies and founded a mighty empire, aided only by the excellence of his judgement and the strength of his perseverance."

"You are right, O Commander of the Faithful," the good courtiers agreed.<sup>1</sup>

Once in a while the passage of time throws up a giant among men, one whose path is beset with difficulties, whose progress is obstructed by every manner of obstacle, who is battered by the winds of adversity but who fights his way through to the end with strength and glory and puts his stamp on history. Such a man was Abdur Rahman bin Muawia, Abdur Rahman the First, Abdur Rahman The Immigrant ... the Falcon of the Quraish.

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\*Translated by Emilio Garcia Gomez and published as volume 4 of *Historia de Espana*.

## APPENDIX B

## THE ISLAMIC CALENDAR

<i>Hijri</i>	<i>Began</i>	<i>Hijri</i>	<i>Began</i>
101	24 Jul 719	137	27 Jun 754
102	12 Jul 720	138	16 Jun 755
103	1 Jul 721	139	5 Jun 756
104	21 Jun 722	140	25 May 757
105	10 Jun 723	141	14 May 758
106	29 May 724	142	4 May 759
107	19 May 725	143	22 Apr 760
108	8 May 726	144	11 Apr 761
109	28 Apr 727	145	1 Apr 762
110	16 Apr 728	146	21 Mar 763
111	5 Apr 729	147	10 Mar 764
112	26 Mar 730	148	27 Feb 765
113	15 Mar 731	149	16 Feb 766
114	3 Mar 732	150	6 Feb 767
115	21 Feb 733	151	26 Jan 768
116	10 Feb 734	152	14 Jan 769
117	31 Jan 735	153	4 Jan 770
118	20 Jan 736	154	24 Dec 770
119	8 Jan 737	155	13 Dec 771
120	29 Dec 737	156	2 Dec 772
121	18 Dec 738	157	21 Nov 773
122	7 Dec 739	158	11 Nov 774
123	26 Nov 740	159	31 Oct 775
124	15 Nov 741	160	19 Oct 776
125	4 Nov 742	161	9 Oct 777
126	25 Oct 743	162	28 Sep 778
127	13 Oct 744	163	17 Sep 779
128	3 Oct 745	164	6 Sep 780
129	22 Sep 746	165	26 Aug 781
130	11 Sep 747	166	15 Aug 782
131	31 Aug 748	167	5 Aug 783
132	20 Aug 749	168	24 Jul 784
133	9 Aug 750	169	14 Jul 785
134	30 Jul 751	170	3 Jul 786
135	18 Jul 752	171	22 Jun 787
136	7 Jul 753	172	11 Jun 788



Hijri	Began	Hijri	Began
173	31 May 789	182	22 Feb 798
174	20 May 790	183	12 Feb 799
175	10 May 791	184	1 Feb 800
176	28 Apr 792	185	20 Jan 801
177	18 Apr 793	186	10 Jan 802
178	7 Apr 794	187	30 Dec 802
179	27 Mar 795	188	20 Dec 803
180	16 Mar 796	189	8 Dec 804
181	5 Mar 797	190	27 Nov 805

## THE ISLAMIC MONTHS

1. Muharram	7. Rajab
2. Safar	8. Shaban
3. Rabi-ul-Awwal	9. Ramazan
4. Rabi-ul-Akhir	10. Shawwal
5. Jamadi-ul-Awwal	11. Zu Qad
6. Jamadi-ul-Akhir	12. Zul Haj

## APPENDIX C

## SPANISH AND ARABIC PLACE NAMES

Alava	أَلْبَة	Avignon	أَنْبِيُون
Albacete	أَلْبَسِيط	Badajoz	بَطْلِيُوس
Albelda	أَلْبِيضَا	Baeza	بَيَّاسَة
Alcala de Henares	قَلْعَةُ الْمَر	Barbastro	بَرْبَاشْتَر
Alcantara	أَلْقَنْطَرَة	Barbate	بَرْبَا ط
Algarve	أَلْغَرْب	Barcelona	بَرْشَلُونَة
Algeciras	الْجَزِيرَة الْخَضْرَاء	Beja	بَا حَة
Alicante	أَلِقَنْت	Biscay	بِسْكَونِيَة
Aljirafe	أَلْجِرَافَة	Babastro	بَبَاشْتَر
Almeria	أَلْمَرْيَة	Brenes	أَلْبَرْنِس
Almodovar	أَلْمُدُور	Burgos	بَرْغَش
Almunecar	أَلْمُنَكَب	Cabra	قَبْرَة
Alpuxarras	أَلْبُشَرَات	Caceres	قَصْرَاش
Amaya	أَمَايَا	Cadiz	قَادِيس
Andujar	أَنْدُوشَار	Calahorra	قَلْهَرَة
Aquitaine	أَكُوْتِين	Calatayud	قَلْعَة أَلْيُوب
Aragon	أَرْغُون	Calatrava	قَلْعَة رِبَاح
Archidona	أَرْحِيذُونَة	Carcassone	قَرْقَشُونَة
Astorga	أَسْتَرْقَة	Carmona	قَرْمُونِيَة
Asturias	أَسْتُورِيَش	Carthage	قَرْطَاجَة الْقَدِيمَة



Cartagena	قَرطَاجَنَة الأَنْدَلُس	Gibraltar	جَبَل طَارِق
Castile	قَشَطَالَة	Granada	غَرْنَاطَة
Catalavera	قَطْلِبِيرَة	Guadaira	وَادِي اَيْرَة
Catalonia	قَطْلُونِيَة	Guadajoz	وَادِي شَوْش
Ceuta	سَبْتَة	Guadalajara	وَادِي الْحَجَّارَة
Cintra	سَنْتْرَة	Guadalazate	وَادِي سَلِيط
Coimbra	قَلْمِيرِيَة	Guadalquivir R.	وَادِي الْكَبِير
Cordoba	قَرْطَبَة	Guadarrama	وَادِي الرَّمْلَة
Coria	قُورِيَة	Guadiana R.	وَادِي آسَة
Cuenca	قُونَكَة	Guadix	وَادِي آش
Daroqa	دَرْوَقَة	Huelva	لَبَّة
Denia	دَانِيَة	Huesca	أَشَقَة
Duero R.	دُورِيَة	Ibiza	يَابِسَة
Ebro R.	إِبْرَة	Jaen	جَيَّان
Ecija	إِسْتِجَة	Jativa	شَاطِبَه
Elvira	إِلْبِيرَة	Jerez	شَرِيش
Evora	يَابُورَة	Leon	لِيُون
Galicia	جَلِيقِيَة	Lerida	لَارِدَة
Gaul	غَالِس	Lisbon	أَشْبُونَة
Genil R.	سَجِيل	Loja	لَوْشَة
Gerona	جِيرَنْدَة	Lorca	لُورَقَة

Lugo	لُك	Rejio	رَبِيَّة
Lusitania	أَلْبُرْتِغَال الْقَدِيمَة	Rhone R.	رَدُونَة
Lyon	لُودُون	Rhonda	رُندَة
Madrid	مَجْرِي ط	Roncesvalles	بَاب الشَّرِي
Majorca	مَيُورَقَة	Sagunto	سَاغُنْت
Malaga	مَالِقَة	Salamanca	طَلَمَنَكَة
Medellin	مَدَلِيْن	Santa Maria	سَنْتَمَرِيَّة
Medinaceli	مَدِينَة سَالِم	Santarem	سَنْتَرِيْن
Medina Sidonia	شَذُونَة	Santiago	سَنْت يَاقُوب
Merida	مَارِدَة	Saragosa	سَرْقُسطَة
Mertola	مَارْتَلَة	Secunda	سَقُنْدَة
Minorca	مَنْوَرَقَة	Segovia	سَقُوبِيَة
Moron	مُوزَر	Sequra	شَاقُورَة
Murcia	مُرسِيَّة	Seville	إِسْبِيلِيَّة
Narbonne	أَرْلُونَة	Sierra Morena	جَبَلُ الشَّارَات
Niebla	لَبَّة	Sierra Nevada	جَبَل شَلِير
Ocsonoba	أَكْشُونِيَّة	Silves	شَلِب
Orihuela	أَرْيُولَة	Sopetran	شَبَطْرَان
Oviedo	أُوبِيَادَة	Soria	سُورِيَّة
Pamplona	بَنْبَلُونَة	Tagus R.	تَاجَة
Pyrenees	بَرْنِيَّة	Talavera	طَلْبِيرَة



Tarazona	طَرَسُونَة	Tudela	تَطِيلَة
Tarifa	جَزِيرَة طَرِيف	Ubeda	أَبَادَة
Tarjela	طَرَجَالَة	Valencia	بَلَنَسِيَة
Tarragona	طَرَكُونَة	Valladolid	بَلَدُ الْوَلِيد
Tocina	طُشَانَة	Valmusa	فَجَّ مَوْسَى
Toledo	طَلِيطْلَة	Viguera	بَقِيرَة
Torrox	طُرُش	Villabaruz	بَارُو
Tortosa	طَرُوشَة	Viseu	بَارُو
Toulouse	طُولُوسَة	Zamora	سَمُورَة
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